SPRING 1945 20¢

Frontier Stories

TRADE MARK REG.

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE ADVENTURES OF THE DAUNTLESS MEN AND WOMEN WHO CARVED A NEW EMPIRE—THE WEST

TOMAHAWK VALLEY

A NOVELET OF THE MOHAWK TERROR

By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

TEN WAGONS FOR TEXAS!

A NOVEL OF THE LONE STAR PIONEERS

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

These people buy a battleship —every week!

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Frontier Stories

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Three Novelets of the Old Frontiers

TOMAHAWK VALLEY . . . . . John Murray Reynolds 2

A brutal wilderness was Tryon County of New York in the year 1781. And now Walter Butler, of the redhanded Rangers, was sweeping the Mohawk.

COLT QUEEN OF GUERRILLA PASS . . . . . Al Storm 30

Out into the Rockies roved the outposts of the armies in Blue and Gray. But swifter rode men without a flag, and red death rode with them.

BIG MUDDY MASSACRE . . . . . Charles N. Heckelmann 68

For the soldier, the bivouac; for the fur men, the trap line. Jack Bundy's world was the river, and the stout boat was his castle.

Six Frontier Stories and Features

BOND BOY . . . . . William R. Cox 16

Humblest member of Ashby's big train was Joe, the runaway bond boy.

THE MAN WITH FOUR EARS . . . . . M. E. Mason 26

A killer among killers was Slade of the Overland stage empire.

SOLDIER vs. APACHE . . . . . Fairfax Downey 54

The West had seen Indian trouble—but nothing like the Apache terror.

GOLD-RUSH GUNS . . . . . M. Howard Lane 62

Lawman Burne had taken off his badge, but his Colts still found work.

DEATH RIDES A FAST PONY (Trading Post) . . . . Bret Austin 92

Cimarron Payne was scout enough to show Custer a trick of frontier war.

PONY EXPRESS 95

An Old West tradition is carried on in this meeting place for all FRONTIER readers.

A Long Novel of the Prairie Schooner

TEN WAGONS FOR TEXAS! . . . . . William Heuman 96

The fate of three nations rolled with that last caravan from the Mississippi to Santa Fe. For a death storm swirled on the border to smother Cole Brandon and his ten stout Conestogas and all of his hardbitten crew.

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52

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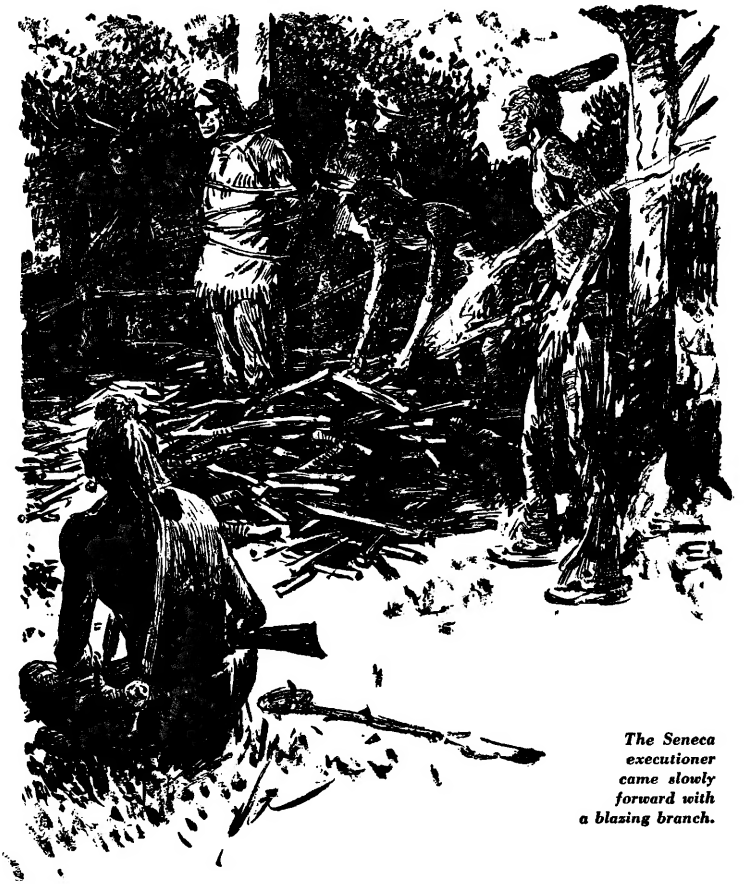
TOMAHAWK VALLEY

By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

THERE was a charp chill in the air, a chill that cut through the buckskins of the two men who moved quietly down the trace. The sky, when they occasionally glimpsed it through the trees, was gray and sunless. Autumn was coming early to Tryon County, in that year 1781. Frost had already touched the pumpkins that ripened in such of those guarded fields as were still under cultivation. Frost was also now tinting the underbrush that grew over those thousands of burned farms and nameless graves, the wreckage of war that marked the border like an open scar!



The Seneca executioner came slowly forward with a blazing branch.

Jared Cleve's home was marked by a blackened chimney and the graves of his kin. Walter Butler's work! And Butler, the border raider, was sweeping Tryon County with hatchet and flame. . . .

A Novelet of the Mohawk Terror

The two men made no sound as they moved down the trail with long rifles cradled in their left arms. The tails of their coonskin caps swayed over their shoulders as they walked, the long thrums tossed on sleeve and leggins, but their padded moccasins made no sound. Even the soft tap of knife and hatchet sheaths against their thighs was inaudible more than a yard away.

Grim bitterness was sharpening Jared Cleve's tanned and craggy face as he drifted through the forest, while his gray eyes grew cold as smoky flint. Every foot of the way was as familiar to him as the palm of his own hand. Familiar with the

sharp clearness of childhood recollection! Here was the tree where he had shot his first catamount, yonder was the willow bottom where he and Rob Miller used to set twitch-traps in the rabbit runs when they were boys. Old days! It was hard to realize that Rob was dead these past two years, slain by marauding renegades beside the blazing ruins of his father's cabin.

Close behind Jared Cleve, his companion strode with the effortless, bent-kneed pace of the forest-runner. Long John Randall stood half a head above Jared's own six feet, a gaunt and grizzled figure with a face carved from old walnut. His grizzled gray eyebrows formed a straight line, except where one of them was broken by the old scar of a knife wound. A willow twig moved up and down between his yellowed teeth as he gnawed at the bark, and his restless eyes were ceaselessly in movement from one side of the trail to the other. A row of Iroquois scalps, with the hair died red, was sewn to the bottom of his baldric. Except for Tim Murphy, and possibly Dave Elerson, there was no swifter and more deadly shot on the whole frontier than Long John Randall.

As they came to the rim of a clearing, both men halted. They halted instinctively, without any spoken word, with the innate caution of men whose lives depend upon constant and unceasing vigilance. Both of them dropped motionless in the dry grass, rifles cocked and ready. Men took no chances along the northwest frontier, in that year of peril and death.

At last Randall grunted and rose to his feet, long rifle held in one corded fist as easily as though it was a hickory twig. He prowled the rim of the clearing, then came to a halt on the far side. When he stood motionless, his travel-stained buckskins were scarcely visible against the rampart of dying leaves behind him.

"Reckon there's no one here," he said.

Jared Cleve moved slowly into the center of the clearing, his rifle at the trail and his tanned face grimmer than ever. Brambles plucked at the thrums of his leggins as he crossed the tangled mass of weeds that covered what had once been a plowed field, before the Tories and Iroquois stole through the forest with blood on their warhatchets. In the midst of the thicket, the stone chimney of a cabin stood like a gaunt and blackened sentinel, with coarse grasses growing up through the ashes of the cabin walls that were spread around the empty and rain-swept hearth. Beyond were the sere and distorted skeletons of dead fruit trees, remains of an orchard that the raiders had girdled and killed in their fury.

This looted and abandoned farm, this place where once men had labored to carve a home from the wilderness and which the forest was now reclaiming for its own, was but one of thousands of such desolate spots along the frontier. But this autumn, after five years of war, over half the farms in County Tryon were abandoned to the weeds and the wolves, with their owners either killed or captive.

At the far side of the clearing, Jared Cleve came to a halt and slowly dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground. Just beside him, half overgrown with blackberry bushes, was a series of low mounds. The graves of his family! Lying where he himself had hastily buried them two years before, after the Iroquois had raided the farm and killed the inhabitants. For a moment Jared took off his coonskin cap. Then, just as he turned away, his eye caught a gleam of metal in the tangled grass and he stooped to pick up a button.

And the button was flame-scorched.

It was only a rounded bit of pewter, that button, but it bore the insignia of Butler's Rangers. Walter Butler's men! The scourge of the border, the murderers of Cherry Valley, the black-clad Tory raiders who hunted with the wolves of the Iroquois! Jared had always suspected that Butler's men had led the attack that flame-shot afternoon he returned to find his home burned and his family killed.

But now he had the proof.

A muscle twitched briefly in his tanned cheek. "Someday, before the war is over, I'll have that black-hearted murderer Walter Butler lined up over my sights," he said aloud. It was the first word that either Jared or Randall had spoken in over an hour. There was sympathy in the old rifleman's faded eyes, but Randall only nodded toward the trail that led away from the clearing.

"Best pull foot, lad," he said, "There's nothing we can do here."

AGAIN the two men moved down the trail, at the same easy and silent lope. Randall happened to be in the lead this time, and they had gone about a mile when the gaunt forest-runner suddenly stopped and dropped on one knee with his long rifle cocked and ready. In response to Jared's inquiring glance, the other man pointed down at the trail directly before them.

A leaf lay on the trail. It was a newly fallen leaf, yellow with autumn, but it had been flattened by the impress of a weight. Someone had passed along this trail very recently!

No word passed between the two frontiersmen. There was no need of speech at that moment, between those two veterans of the trail. They went cautiously forward a little further, saw that the woods were opening out to a small clearing where a brook ran through, and dropped flat on their bellies to inch their way slowly up to the edge of the ravine.

Before them lay a small hollow with the glint of water at the bottom, and a bit of marshy ground beside the stream. The place apparently lay silent and serene under the autumn sun—but Jared noticed there were no wild ducks among the cat-tails along the stream. And a half-dozen crows were circling warily overhead!

Something must have passed here very recently, to have frightened the birds away. Randall touched Jared's elbow for a moment, nodded to the right, and then crawled noiselessly away to the rear.

While the slow minutes passed, Jared Cleve lay motionless where he was. The sweat trickled down into his ears, and he was conscious of the dull buzzing of a blue bottle fly directly overhead. Though his eyes never ceased their vigilant searching of the scene before him, and he was alert to any sound or movement, one part of his mind wandered off to other scenes and other times. The day he fought in the ranks of Morgan's Rifles at the battle of the Chemung . . . the way the powder-stained veterans of the New York Line had advanced at the double through the drifting smoke of battle. Then, irritably, he wondered why a foreboding of trouble and disaster had been with him all day.

When five minutes had passed, Jared Cleve resumed his slow crawl forward. Directly at the rim of the gully he halted, and after a moment he placed his coonskin cap on top of his war hatchet. He raised his cap just above the rim of the bushes—but nothing happened. If the man who had frightened the crows away was still hidden somewhere in the ravine, as Jared suspected, he was too wise in the ways of wilderness warfare to be trapped by as old a trick as that. Jared put his cap back on his head, and closed his hand around the stock of his rifle, and pushed the muzzle a few inches further forward.

Suddenly a lone Seneca stood bolt upright among the cat-tails across the ravine! He was painted dead black from head to foot, a sable blot against the mottled brown and green of the background. Jared fired, but the Seneca had dropped a split second after he rose, and the shot was too late.

Then the gully echoed to a shrill yell as the Seneca leaped to his feet and bounded forward. Having drawn his opponent's fire and thus emptied his rifle, the Iroquois came in with the death-maul swinging, confident of his ability to win over a white man in a hand-to-hand fight. Jared stood up and clubbed his rifle—but he glanced to his right.

A spurt of yellow flame stabbed out through the sumac leaves some yards up the clearing, where Long John Randall had crouched in concealment. The Seneca went down like a felled ten-pin, rolling over twice and landing with his blackened face in a pool of stagnant water. The gaunt forest-runner leaped over the barrier of bushes that had screened him, and bounded down the slope with his long knife gleaming in his hand. He lifted the dead Seneca's head for a moment, and there was a tearing sound as the scalp came loose. Then Randall walked slowly back up the slope, pausing to slap the wet scalp against the trunk of a sapling to shake off the blood.

"That varmint had dead black paint all over him, younker," he said grimly. "Black all over! That means he was not just a lone brave on a scalp hunt—but the executioner of some war party."

"Then the Iroquois are out in strength?"

"Must be."

"Then God help the border!" Jared rasped. "Well—we'd better get the word through to the settlements at once."

"Colonel Marinus Willett at Johnstown

is the best man to tell," Randall said. He broke off a fresh willow twig, and began to worry it with his yellowed teeth. "That gray Old Fox is in command of all Tryon County now."

II

AGAIN the two frontiersmen swung forward, leaving the dead Seneca where he lay with his face in the muddy pool. When they came to a fork in the trail a mile further on, Jared hesitated.

"You go direct to Johnstown and warn Willett, John," he said, "I'll take a swing up Tribes' Hill to warn the folks up that way before I come in to town."

"If you meet up with Walter Butler, give him a bullet for me!" Randall grinned, then he turned away up the nearer fork of the trail.

For a moment Jared Cleve stood watching while Randall's faded buckskins blended with the autumn leaves and finally vanished among the trees. Then, lifting his own rifle with his left hand, Jared opened the pan and blew out the powder. He carefully refilled the hollow of the pan with black grains of French powder from his horn, and made sure the flint was firmly set in place in the hammer. If the Iroquois were moving in from their shadowy empire to strike the settlements again, the lives of all the men and women left along this harried border might well be at stake.

Jared Cleve felt very tired as he moved soundlessly along the trail. Not physically weary—for his forest-trained muscles had long since asquired the almost limitless vitality of the Iroquois—but mentally tired. The war went on forever. Five and a half years had already passed since the snarling guns first spoke at Lexington, and since that day their thunder had never been stilled.

Worst of all was the fate of this northwest frontier, this vast expanse of forest land and scattered farms that lay like a buffer between the settlements along the Hudson and the Dark Empire of the Long House. The Iroquois and Tories had now ravaged ceaselessly for years. Men plowed the fields with their loaded rifles slung on their backs, and the homespun militia of County Tryon fought countless desperate and unrecorded battles. Few regular troops could be spared by the hard-pressed and impoverished Continental Army to protect this northland. In the main, the fate of the frontiersmen who lived there rested in their own calloused hands—and on the sights of their long rifles!

And now it was to be hatchet and scalping knife again! The news from the south sounded better, for His Excellency General Washington had moved the main Continental Army down to attack Cornwallis in Virginia in a sudden surprise move that had caught the Bloody-Backs flatfooted. A victory down at Yorktown would doubtless be important to the country as a whole, if it came—but it would have no immediate effect on the fortunes of these harried folk of the northern frontier!

Jared Cleve passed three farms within the next hour, but only one of the three was inhabited. The other two lay burned and abandoned, already half overgrown by the underbrush of the encroaching forest like his father's home that he had passed a few hours before. From the ruins of one cabin a gray timberwolf stole out, low-hipped and sullen, trotting away into the forest after bearing its fangs in a snarl. Jared cursed, and his hands tightened on the stock of his rifle, but he did not dare risk the sound of a shot without better reason than the sight of a wolf. Cleve's nostrils caught the scent of wood-smoke before he came to the third clearing, and this time he saw a well-kept farm where the corn stood already shocked in the fields and most of the pumpkins had been harvested. There were two cabins, and a barn, all built of sturdy logs.

The family of settlers gathered in a compact knot as Jared paused to tell them the news he carried. The faces of all of them, the gaunt frontier farmer and his three taciturn sons, the women and even the children, grew bleak and sullen as Jared spoke. The farmer cleared his throat.

"I know," he said, "A trapper went by yesterday and told us a rumor that Sir John Johnston and his Royal Greens are on the Sac-andaga."

"Better close up and get to the nearest block-house," Jared told them, but two of the farmer's sons turned away without a word and began to cover the cabin windows with heavy wooden shutters that were pierced for rifle-fire.

"Thanks, but I reckon we'll stay and fight it out here," the old man said stubbornly, "The army counts on us folk of Tryon to raise the food for 'em, and I can't abandon these crops."

"Good luck, then," Jared said, and turned away. He knew better than to try to argue with one of these border settlers who had already made up his mind. The farmer called after him the familiar rebel watch word: "God save our country, friend!"

ONE more house Jared passed on his way down around the loop of the Tribes' Hill trail. He saw the gray and weathered wood of the house gleaming through the trees before he came to the circular clearing that surrounded it. The shingled roof stood dark against the autumn sky. This place was no mere settler's cabin, but a two-story house of matched boards with columns either side of the paneled front door.

All about was the desolation of abandonment. Weeds had smothered the flower gardens, though the faded colors of some late autumn asters still showed among them; rank grasses had overgrown the lawn. The well was clogged with rubble and a mat of fallen leaves. The paint was peeling from the door of the house, and the dark emptiness of broken windows showed behind one or two of the shutters that had been ripped loose to swing crazily from a single hinge. But the house itself had not been burned! Not one of the dusky raiding parties that had made the border a flaming hell for the past five years had ever fired or even looted it! For this had been the family home of Captain Walter Butler!

Dropping the butt of his rifle to the ground, Jared Cleve leaned thoughtfully on the muzzle. This gray, abandoned house was Butlersbury. This was the home of Colonel John Butler who had organized Butler's Rangers, and of his bloody-handed son Captain Walter Butler, the home from which they had both fled to organize their regiment of renegades when the war first started. No war party of the Iroquois had ever harmed this home of the Tory leaders, and no man of the Colonists cared to live there, even though the Committee of Sequestration had taken possession. Five years of neglect had given the place an appearance as though it were haunted by the ghosts of all the men and women that Butler's Rangers had murdered in a hundred border forays.

For long minutes on end Jared stood there, leaning on his rifle, the ragged thrums of his buckskins stirring on the autumn wind. He was thinking of this house as he had more than once seen it on summer evenings in his childhood, with candle-light shining hospitably through the windows, and many horses being led around to the stables by holsters as guests arrived, and a sound of music coming from within, as the Butlers entertained the gentry of the countryside. It was one of the great tragedies of the war, in this grim and blood-stained northern county of Tryon, that the men who should have been its leaders had turned Tory. Unlike the public-spirited Washingtons and Jeffersons of the south, the landed gentry of County Tryon has sold out their neighbors for the King's gold and had joined the Tories and Iroquois in making war on their former friends and neighbors.

For a moment more Jared Cleve mused, standing there amid the weed-choked gardens of Butlersbury. Then, just as he was turning away, a grim and deceptively gentle voice spoke behind him.

"It seems that you admire my house and grounds, sir." Jared spun about, half raising his rifle, but it was too late to defend himself. He was looking square into the muzzle of a heavy dragoon pistol.

The man who faced Jared Cleve wore a dead black broadcloth uniform. Black, with facings of bright orange. His silver buttons bore the grim motto of the Tory rangers, his sword hilt was ornamented with a twisted thong of buckskin heavily embroidered with silver and wampum. The garb of Butler's Rangers! That uniform with its captain's epaulettes would have betrayed the man, even if Jared had not recognized that lean and pallid face, with the lank black hair that hung straight and unpowdered on either side.

"Walter Butler," Jared said through dry lips. This was the man who had led the murderers of Cherry Valley, the most feared and hated man along the entire frontier.

"It seems that you know me," the Tory leader said.

Butler's pale face was expressionless and his black eyes unblinking. He took a cautious step backwards, but his pistol muzzle never wavered. Then he raised a silver whistle to his lips and blew a single shrill blast.

There was no chance of escape! For a fleeting instant Jared considered a swift and sudden counter-attack—but he read his death in Butler's dull eyes and knew that any sudden movement would bring a slug of lead in his brain. He was trapped, hopelessly trapped, because a nostalgic mood had led him to commit the cardinal frontier sin of relaxing his vigilance. There was nothing that he could do about it now.

III

IN answer to Butler's whistle, a score of painted Senecas breasted through the underbrush and trotted into the clearing. Their paint flashed in the sun, their rifle barrels and the blades of their war hatchets were gleaming. One of them snatched Jared's rifle away from him, a pair of others lashed his wrists behind his back with leathern thongs. A tall Iroquois shook a death maul in his face, and Jared braced himself for the blow that would crack his skull, but the leader of the Senecas barked a command and they all moved out.

As the war party swung up the trail, with flankers out on either side and scouts trotting ahead, Jared saw that there was another prisoner. A middle-aged farmer in homespun breeches and a holland shirt, he plodded along with his gray hair matted with blood where someone had struck him a glancing blow with a *castete*. The man's bloodshot and horror-struck eyes flickered toward Jared for a moment as they were herded together in the center of the war party, but he did not speak.

It was near dusk when the Iroquois halted, lashing the prisoners to a pair of saplings a few paces apart and then kindling a small fire for their own scanty meal. Jared had not seen Butler since a few minutes after he was taken, but now the Tory leader rode slowly into the clearing on a horse. His black cloak drooped back over his shoulders, and his head was bare. Drawing rein, he studied the two captives for a few moments in silence, his dull eyes flickering from one to the other, and then they came to rest on Jared.

"Cleve," he said in his flat voice. "Jared Cleve. I recall you now. I did not know you at first, but I remember you now. Tell me, how well prepared are Willett's defenders at Johnstown?"

"Better than those of the women and children you murdered at Cherry Valley," Jared said with a sneer.

Butler's thin lips twitched. "You are not wise to indulge in such heroics at this time," he said tonelessly. "You are a prisoner of these Senecas, and it will go hard with you unless I intercede. How many men has Willet at Fort Rennsalear and Johnstown?"

"I don't know," Jared snapped, "And I wouldn't tell you if I did."

Butler shrugged. "We'll resume this discussion later," he said, and rode off through the trees.

For a few moments there was no sound in the twilight but the faint crackle of the Senecas' cooking fire. Then Jared began to hear a dull thudding, the tramp of many marching men. It increased and grew nearer, and a moment later a pair of horsemen in faded red tunics rode past the clearing with carbines on thigh. Behind them came a score of additional Iroquois, painted for war and with rifles at the trail, and now the air was heavy with the thud of marching boots.

By turning his head, Jared could see the slow column of raiders as they tramped past in the firelit dusk with their muskets slanting over their shoulders. They were an assorted and motley crew, these men that Walter Butler had gathered together to raid the pleasant valley that had been his boyhood home! White cross-belts gleamed against scarlet tunics as a hundred british regulars of the Thirty-fourth Regiment went past. Behind them came a score of men from the Eighth Regiment, and then a scant three dozen men of the Eighty-fourth Highlanders. Their tattered kilts swayed as they marched, shoulders hunched forward against the weight of their packs, water bottles tapping against their buttocks.

The Regulars had passed, vanishing in the forest dusk ahead, and now the trail was filled with a torrent of men in the green and buff of the Tory militia as

shrugged and turned away. Instantly the Seneca executioner hurled the blazing branch into the heap of branches piled about the other prisoner's legs.

The dry branches caught at once. Flames leaped quickly among them, with a crackling sound that increased with each passing second, and an acrid smoke began to drift across the clearing. Flames began to lick at the doomed man's clothing, and Jared saw that he had closed his eyes and had set his teeth in his lower lip till the blood ran down his chin.

Jared Cleve turned his head away. He could not watch the thing that was happening. It was horrible and unreal, a ghastly nightmare that was to haunt his sleep for all the rest of his life. The increasing crackle of the flames . . . the yells of the Iroquois and the hoarse screaming of the tortured man . . .

At last, when the screaming had ceased and the fire had died down and there was only a heap of glowing coals left about the base of the blackened tree-trunk, the Seneca executioner again took a freshly burning branch from the fire. Walter Butler walked forward.

"It is now *your* turn, my stubborn friend," he said.

For a moment Jared Cleve leaned his head back against the tree trunk behind him. He was soaked with a nervous sweat, and at the same time he was shivering as he stood motionless in his bonds.

"You can still go to hell!" he said.

Captain Walter Butler shrugged. The gesture was only a slight lifting of his lean and bony shoulders, but it was a death sentence. He turned away, and the Seneca executioner moved forward with the torch blazing in his hand.

IV

SOMETHING stirred in the darkness of the underbrush on one side of the clearing. It was only a slight sound, but the keen ears of the Iroquois caught it and one Seneca reached his hand toward his rifle. An instant later the night was split by a tongue of yellow flame as a rifle fired from the shadows a scant twenty yards off.

Jared heard the thud of a bullet striking flesh. He saw the executioner falter in midstride, saw the strangely startled expression that came across his painted face, and then saw him go to his knees before falling across the torch that had dropped from his stricken fingers. More rifles spoke together, another Seneca went down, and a shrill yelling sounded from the blackness outside the rim of the clearing.

"Come on, lads!" yelled a hoarse and familiar voice, "Give the varmints hell! Close in on the other side!"

The clearing became a wild and confused turmoil. Moccasined feet kicked the brands of the fire apart, painted figures snatched up their rifles and ducked into the shadows beyond the clearing. Apparently menaced from both sides, the Iroquois darted from between the jaws of the trap. Then, while a confused yelling came from several directions at once and rifles twinkled like fireflies, Jared felt a touch of cold steel against his wrists as a hunting knife hastily slashed the rawhide thongs that bound him.

"Come on, lad!" a hoarse voice whispered in his ear, "Pull foot out of here before the varmints recover!"

"Long John!" Jared gasped. A moment later he was following the tall frontiersman in headlong flight through the forest.

They ran steadily for perhaps half a mile, splashed through a ford, and paused panting on the far bank. Randall's rifle was at the ready as he lifted his voice in the harsh cry of a screech owl, but the same cry came from the dim figures breasting the ford and four men came to join them. They were chuckling as they paused to reprime their rifles and then once more took up the flight at a steady trot.

"But where are the others?" Jared asked. Randall laughed.

"That's all there is, younker. We made a mighty lot of noise, like a bear in a dead fall, and I reckon those painted devils thought there was a full company of militia around them. I trailed the war party when I sighted them with you a prisoner, and these four lads were the only ones I could collect to help me with a rescue."

"Well!" Jared said unsteadily, "I never thought to be moving on my own feet again!"

"Here's a spare rifle," Randall said, thrusting the weapon into his hands.

"Where'd you get it?"

Johnston's Royal Greens tramped past. The black-garbed renegades of Butler's Rangers came behind them, and then a polyglot mass of Yaegers, Iroquois and renegades who marched by without any semblance of order. A few bat-wagons strained along in the rear of the column, jolting over the narrow forest road. As closely as Jared could count the uneven ranks tramping past in the dusk, there were a thousand men in Butler's flying column.

A thousand rifles to raid the border! Ten hundred men to harry once more this blood-stained Valley of the Mohawk! Jared Cleve tugged hopelessly at his bonds and swore through his teeth till a Seneca stood up from where he crouched by the fire and walked over to strike him heavily across the mouth with the flat of his war hatchet.

SALT blood was running into Jared's mouth from his torn lips, but he spat it out and was scarcely conscious of the pain. He could think only of what it would mean to the settlers when Butler struck the Valley with his thousand rifles. There were no Continental Regulars this far north at this time, and though Colonel Willett was well established at Johnstown with the Tryon militia, he was not expecting a Tory invasion in such heavy force at this time. If there were only some way to get word to him!

Then Walter Butler came back, walking on foot this time, his lank hair hanging straight on either side of his pale face and his black cloak wrapped around him.

"Are you ready to tell me of Willett's strength and dispositions, Cleve?" he asked.

"I'll see you in hell first!" Jared said through clenched teeth. Butler shrugged.

"You are stubborn." His flat voice was toneless and even. "Very well. I might have saved you from the Senecas, but now you will have to take the consequences."

While Butler was talking, a score of the Senecas had been quietly moving closer to the prisoners. Now, at a nod from the Tory leader, an Iroquois sachem snapped a brief command. Painted warriors cut the captives loose from the trees to which they were bound, and dragged them off through the shadows to another clearing some distance from the main camp. Here a small fire was tended by a war-party executioner painted dead black to the waist, and a pair of small trees had been stripped clean of all their lower branches. Jared knew what was coming then, knew it with a sort of sick horror, and he nervously licked his cut and bleeding lips.

A pair of Iroquois lashed Jared upright to one of the stakes. They bound him with a single cord, a sort of long whip that must have been fifty feet in length, so that it went around him a score of times between the throat and the ankles. When they had finished he could still move his head, but was otherwise utterly motionless. At once they began to heap dead branches and twigs around his feet and legs till the pile rose nearly to his waist. The gray-haired farmer who was the second captive was being prepared for burning at the second stake in the same manner.

Now the Seneca executioner plucked a blazing branch from the fire and came slowly forward. Butler flung his black cloak back over his shoulders and began to finger his sword hilt.

"My Iroquois like to burn their prisoners one at a time," he said, "It prolongs their amusement. Oddly primitive, isn't it?" He chuckled noiselessly, a grimace that momentarily distorted his pale face. "I'll have them save you till last, just in case you want to change your mind and tell me what I want to know."

THERE was a momentary pause. It was a scene that Jared Cleve never forgot, a tableau from hell. The firelit clearing amid the blackness of the frontier forest . . . the menacing horde of Iroquois with their eyes gleaming fiercely in their painted faces . . . Walter Butler standing there, evilly debonair in his sable uniform —and the haggard face of the other prisoner across the clearing. Jared moistened his lips again.

"But you're a white man, Butler!" he said hoarsely. "Surely you can't do a thing like this!"

"You're the Senecas' prisoner, not mine." Butler's thin lipped smile was mocking. "I can't interfere with the customs of my dusky allies, you know, except in very special cases. Of, course, if you want to forget your rebel stubbornness and tell me what I want to know . . ." Butler's voice trailed off. He hesitated a moment, then

"The sentry the Senecas had out to the east'ard made a mistake—he got too close to a tree!" Long John Randall chuckled, "I may be getting old, but there's still a lot of catamount left in my blood! I dropped on him from above. Now—for Johnstown and Willett!"

MOST of the rest of the night they traveled through the forest toward Johnstown. There was no trail to follow for the route they were taking, but even in the darkness of the wilderness the instincts and cunning of the frontiersmen led them foreward at a pace only slightly slower than they could have made in the daylight.

Jared had told Long John of Butler's forces, and the scout was concerned.

Now and then they heard distant shots, and once Randall growled deep in his throat. "Butler's Iroquois must have fanned out to ravage the countryside," he said.

They had a further evidence of this, once, when they moved quietly along the crest of a ridge. The stars were clear and cold and quiet above them—but they could see distant fires burning at isolated spots in the forest. Flames from lonely wilderness farms that had been attacked and put to the torch.

"Let's slip over and wing a few of the painted devils!" one of the militiamen suggested, but Randall shook his head.

"It's more important that we get through to Willett with the news of Butler's strength and position. Jared's got something wuth while."

For the first two hours after his rescue, Jared Cleve had been near exhaustion. It had been mental rather than physical, nervous reaction after being rescued just at the moment when he had resigned himself to death in its most horrible form, but he had been hard driven to keep up with the others. Then, after a while, he acquired a sort of second wind and became himself once more. His cut wrists ached from where the rawhide thongs had torn them, and there was dried blood about his mouth, but his natural resilience had reasserted itself.

He had one more score to settle with Walter Butler! Not so much for the things that had happened to himself, but for the ghastly death that the Tory leader had so casually allotted to the farmer who had been his fellow prisoner. As he strode through the darkness, Jared ran his fingers over the lock and along the barrel of the rifle that Randall had taken from the slain Iroquois sentry. It seemed to be a good enough weapon. Not as fine as his own Deckhardt that had been taken from him when he was captured, but a serviceable piece for all that. He hefted the powder-horn and found it nearly full; his groping fingers estimated the number of bullets in the shot pouch. Yes—he was ready.

A sudden premonition came to Jared Cleve at that moment, striding through the chill darkness toward Johnstown. A strong premonition that this was to be his last campaign. Perhaps he would be killed in the battle that would come on the morrow, perhaps there would be some other reason for hanging up his rifle—he did not know. But he felt strangely certain that this was to be his last march under arms, his last campaign, his final part in the endless war. If ever he was to settle his account with Walter Butler, he must do it before *this* affair was over.

It was close to dawn when they saw the trees thin out before them, and glimpsed the roof and chimneys of Johnston Hall against the starlit sky ahead. Twice they were challenged by alert and wary militia patrols, twice they passed through when Randall identified them. The sergeant in command of the second patrol tucked his musket under his arm as he blew on his chilled hands.

"Colonel Willett's at the Hall now," he told them, "And so are half the folks in town. There's something hellish going on down there in the valley."

"Butler's there with a thousand rifles," Jared said quietly. The sergeant whistled through his teeth.

"Wait till Marinus Willett hears that! The Old Fox has been spoiling for a fight—and now it looks like he'll get one at last."

The stars were paling as they walked across the tangled lawn to Johnston Hall, the imposing house that had been the manor of His Majesty's Commissioner for Indian Affairs before the war. An uneasy, murmuring crowd of mingled militia-men and townsfolk, men and women alike, stood around in clustered groups in the gray dawn. Sometimes they talked in low tones,

but mostly they just stared silently down the slope at the scattered pinpoints of light that showed where Butler was burning the Valley.

They located Colonel Marinus Willett, the gray Old Fox of the Border, a tall and gaunt figure in his faded blue and buff uniform. The Colonel listened in silence, tickling the end of his long nose with one forefinger, as Jared told what he knew of Butler's activities and strength. At the end Willett nodded.

"A thousand rifles, eh?" he said, "I think we can take care of them if I send for Rowley's men at Renssalaer. And so Walter Butler had to come back to hit this harried border and ravage his old home just once more this fall, did he?" His voice was low and brooding. "I really think there is a devil in that man. Perhaps the ghosts of his earlier victims drive him to new excesses, as the habitual criminal turns to ever new and greater crimes. Well—" his voice abruptly became crisp, and he smote his gauntleted hands together. "I'll muster our forces, and try to stop Butler at Tribes' Hill. You, Randall, rejoin your regiment and tell the Rifles to be ready to march within the hour. I'll send an express rider to Renssalaer at once. You others join up with the local militia."

"And me, sir?" Jared asked.

Willett grinned at him. "You need a rest," he said, "You've been through a lot in the past few hours, from the look of you. Go down to the stone jail, which we've made into a blockhouse, and get some sleep."

"I reckon I can still fight," Jared said stubbornly. Willett gestured over his shoulder with one broad thumb. "Do as you're told, younker! Go and get some sleep. You won't miss the fighting."

Jared shouldered his rifle and turned away. Even as he left the Hall and plodded downhill in the chill dawn, he heard the dull thud of the drums beginning to beat the Assembly.

V

WHEN Jared awoke it was around mid-day and a fitful autumn sun was spilling through the partially opened shutters of the room where he lay on a pile of straw in the corner. He yawned, and rubbed his eyes, and got slowly to his feet. Every muscle in his body ached, and there was a dull pain in the back of his head. Slinging shot pouch and powder horn over his shoulder, and picking up his rifle, he started for the gate.

The stone jail was full of women and children, gathered for the security of its stout walls. Some were cooking at fires in the courtyard, or washing clothes at a row of wooden tubs set on a bench against one wall, but most were gathered in small groups to talk and gossip. The detachment of buckskinned Rangers left to guard the jail looked bored and drowsy as they leaned on their weapons beside the gate or along the firing step of the courtyard stockade. Jared went out into the narrow street, and went down a few doors to the pub at the sign of the Twin Moons.

It was dim in the interior of the tavern, for, like all of Johnstown that morning, it was uneasily alert. Though the door was open, the heavy shutters with their loopholes were in place at all the windows. Jared acknowledged the publican's greeting, and walked across to the bare pine bar.

"Rum," he said, "And yourself?"

"I've some of the best Monongahela, friend." The landlord brought a heavy stone jug down from a shelf behind the bar, and poured some of the fiery liquor into two small pewter cups. "They say Willett has held Butler at Tribes' Hill," he said.

"Hope so. I'll be moving that way in a few minutes," Jared said. "Here's luck!"

"Death to the Bloody-Backs and Tories!"

The fiery rum seemed to clear Jared's aching head. Staring down into the empty cup for a moment, he had a return of yesterday's premonition that this was his last campaign. It was now or never, insofar as his chances of settling his long account with Captain Walter Butler were concerned. He must rejoin Willett's forces at once! He dropped some coins on the bar and pushed his cup across for another drink. Then, just as he and the landlord lifted their cups, there came the sound of a rifle shot. Three other shots followed it a second later.

For a moment Jared and the publican both stood motionless, their cups of rum raised half-way to their lips. The tavern-keeper's round, smooth shaven face seemed

to have lost some of its ruddy color. Neither of the two men spoke, but their eyes were wary with alarm. Then came a ragged volley, and an instant later the bell at the jail began to ring in wild and furious alarm.

"Butler!" the innkeeper gasped, "He must have slipped away from Willett at Tribes' Hill!"

Jared drained his cup and dropped it crashing on the counter. Cocking his rifle as he bounded out the door, he stepped out into a scene of wild confusion. Tories in buff and green were running down the street, citizens were hastily slamming shutters and closing doors along the way, the stockade of the jail was wreathed in smoke as the garrison opened fire. A dead man lay sprawled on his face in the muddy gutter. A block away, an Iroquois shot at a fleeing woman, brought her to her knees, and then stepped forward to brain her with a blow of his rifle-stock. And, over all, the alarm bell at the jail continued its wild and brazen clamor.

A horseman in buff and green fired a dragoon pistol at Jared as he cantered past, the heavy slug thudding into the log wall of the tavern as it missed. Jared fired, knocking the man out of the saddle, and then stepped back inside the shelter of the doorway to reload. The firing was general all along the main street now, but above the rattle of musketry there suddenly came the trill of fifes and the rumble of drums at the double. Willett had reentered the town!

A mass of riflemen and rangers swept steadily up the street, driving the scattered Tories before them. Behind them came a solid column of Tryon County militia in brown and red, advancing at the double with muskets banging on their shoulders, officers trotting forward with drawn swords. They drove Butler's advance party from the town in short orders, and did not even deploy until they neared the slope up to Johnston Hall where the main body of the raiders had taken up their position.

TO Jared Cleve it was all a wild and confused turmoil. He was with the advance as it pushed steadily forward till it reached the line of a hedge half way up the slope toward the Hall, he saw the Americans' lone brass cannon brought and put in position to fire on Butler's lines about the Hall, and he saw Johnson's Greens and the red coats of the Eighty-fourth Regiment sweep down the slope toward the American lines in a yelling charge. He also saw the sudden panic that seized the militia at that moment.

The disordered center of Willett's force suddenly fell balk in great confusion with the Tories yelping at their heels.

The Rangers and the riflemen held the line of the flame-shot hedge as long as they could, but they were now heavily outnumbered. So they broke up into little groups of a few men each and followed the militia, retreating slowly and stubbornly, yard by yard and tree by tree, firing as they went.

Jared was carried along against his will by the tide of retreating militiamen, carried all the way into the outskirts of Johnstown itself. There the tide of panic began to lessen. The officers were managing to make themselves heard again, men were suddenly looking ashamed and coming to a halt. There was a young drummer boy in the throng, and on a sudden thought Jared lifted the lad up on top of an empty cask that stood outside a tavern.

"Beat the assembly!" he snapped, and the hollow thunder of the drum boomed out above the scrape of feet and the babel of voices.

"They've taken our cannon!" someone shouted. "Let's go get it back!" and a ragged cheer answered him. Willett cantered up the street, smiling broadly, waving his cocked hat in his hand.

"Come on, lads!" he shouted, "You can't leave those riflemen and Rangers back there all alone. I'll catch the bullets in my hat. Come on, you men of Tryon, let's go back and finish the job."

The retreat was over. The strange, inexplicable panic had passed as suddenly as it had come. Deploying like veteran troops as they emerged from the streets of the town into the fields once more, the Tryon militia swept forward at the double. The sound of the firing rose to a steady drumroll.

In those late stages of the battle, Jared Cleve again found himself lying in the midst of a mingled mass of militia and riflemen, holding the line of that hedge from which they had once been driven. The

autumn sky was heavily overcast, and the whole flame-shot area was filled with a dim murk of drifting powder-smoke. Jared fired and reloaded and fired again, till the barrel of his long rifle grew hot to the touch and his shoulder ached from the pound of the recoil. More and more men were coming into the line, adding to the growing weight of fire power, and Jared could sense the increasing tension that heralded the approach of a climax. The rumor spread along the line, passed from mouth to mouth, that Rawling's column of levies had arrived to take the Tories on the flank so that Willett's men were no longer outnumbered.

Then the bugles blew!

Charge!

All along the line their brazen clamor rang clear above the roar of the fighting. Then sounded the rolling thunder of drums.

Charge!

OFFICERS' whistles were trilling, men began to scramble to their feet. "Forward! Forward!" shouted the officers, running ahead with drawn sabers through the drifting smoke that came rolling down the slope in a dun cloud to meet them. "Forward!" echoed the bugles. A full company of Tryon reinforcements came up at the double, halted just behind the hedge while the front rank dropped on one knee, and was suddenly wreathed in smoke as the front rank fired in volley by platoons. Red flashes stabbed through the acrid smoke as the second rank fired—and then there was a flash of leveled steel as they all went forward with the bayonet.

All along the line of the blackened hedge, men were springing to their feet. War hatchets and hunting knives flashed, muskets and pistols spoke at close range. Jared fired at a Tory a few yards away, clubbed his rifle to parry the flashing stroke of a Cayuga war hatchet, and then drove the steel-shod butt into the savage's painted face. Beside him, Long John Randall, brought close by the swirl of battle, was swearing through clenched and yellowed teeth as he stood erect, a gaunt figure in his fringed and tattered buckskins, swinging his long rifle like a flail.

For a few breathless moments the locked lines swayed to and fro, all along the slope. Portions of the hedge were won and lost several times in the space of a few minutes. Then came the end! The militia surged forward shoulder to shoulder, Mohawks and Senecas began to slink to the rear with rifles at the trail, Johnson's Greens were giving ground. Then the Tory line gave way suddenly and completely, along its whole length, and the embattled frontiersmen smashed through the hedge to charge up the trampled grass of the slope beyond.

The Rangers were yelling shrilly as they went forward through the smoke. There was a weird chanting of *"Oonah! Oonah!* —Woe! Woe!" as Willett's Oneidas, naked to the waist, plunged in with knives and hatchets flashing for the kill. They had their own score to settle with the rest of the once mighty but now shattered and riven Long House of the Iroquois! A moment later the fiercely melancholy Oneida scalp-yell rose clear above the scattered noise of the fighting.

Jared went forward with the rest, reloading as he ran and halting momentarily to fire at the fleeing Tories. As a platoon of Morgan's Rifles came abreast of him, Long John Randall grinned wolfishly at him from the midst of the buckskinned throng.

"Good hunting!" he barked. *"This* time we make the kill!"

VI

FOR four days and nights, Willett and his vengeful frontiersmen followed the broken remnants of Captain Walter Butler's raiders on their northward flight. Many of the militia from the Valley settlements had fallen out, unable to keep up the killing pace, but the Rangers and riflemen and all the hard-bitten forest-runners were still there. Hour by hour and mile by mile they hung on the flanks and rear of the beaten horde, picking off man after man with their questing bullets, giving them no rest nor peace nor pause. The only possible refuge for Butler's remnant lay up at Fort Niagara—and that was many miles to the northward, through a chill and inhospitable wilderness.

It was late in the afternoon when Jared, scouting to the east of the trail and momentarily separated from the others, paused on the bank of a swollen stream. He was studying some confused footprints that

were already half obscured by the steadily falling snow.

Suddenly Jared heard the thudding hoof-beats of a horse. He lifted his rifle and stepped to the shelter of a tree trunk, whirling to face in the direction from which the rider was coming. The horseman swung into sight at a slow canter, muddy snow flying from under the plunging hoofs. For a moment it was hard to make out the dim figure in the twilight—but then Jared recognized him.

A fierce triumph came to Jared Cleve at that moment. At last, at long last, he had his mortal enemy within reach of his sights! Deliberately stepping out from behind the tree, Jared raised the long rifle to his shoulder. Butler saw him then, and swerved, and clutched frantically at one of the dragoon pistols in his saddle holsters, but Jared held the weapon straight and true as he pulled the trigger. The spark fell squarely in the pan—but there was no answering flash. *The priming had become damp!* An instant later, Butler's pistol roared, and Jared was knocked flat in the snow by a sledge-hammer blow in his left shoulder.

WAVES of pain were sweeping over Jared Cleve. They left him weak, but otherwise he scarcely felt them in the excess of his bitter anger and frustration. With sick eyes he saw Butler thrust the smoking pistol back into the holster, glance down at him once, and then wheel again to the ford. The waters splashed white as the horse plunged through the stream, fetlock deep. On the far side, Butler drew rein. His foam-covered, steaming horse dropped its nose to the stream. Butler glanced hastily to right and left, then slipped stiffly from the saddle and knelt down to drink himself. He was scooping up the water in the palm of his hands.

With slow and painful care, Jared raised himself on his good elbow and managed to brace his back and shoulders against the tree beside which he lay. He blew out the remainder of the dampened priming, then renewed it with fresh powder from his horn. He raised the rifle to his shoulder, resting and steadying the muzzle on a fallen tree trunk just before him, and sighted at that black-and-orange figure across the ford. Once again he squeezed the trigger—and this time the long rifle spoke its bellowing message of death.

Walter Butler swayed, and one hand went to his throat. White smoke was still drifting away from the muzzle of Jared's rifle as its butt slipped from his weakened fingers and he became more conscious of the pain in his left side. Loud voices and the sound of running feet came from close at hand then, as half a dozen Oneidas and rangers burst through the screen of snow-covered bushes that circled the clearing by the ford. As they caught sight of Butler on his knees beyond the stream, they bayed like a hunting wolf-pack in full cry.

A tall Oneida scout was in the lead, and the waters of the ford boiled as he bounded across. Butler raised a ghastly face, blood streaming between the fingers at his throat, and fumbled for the knife at his belt. He was too late.

A gaunt figure in fringed buckskin turned aside from the others, and Long John Randall knelt beside Jared.

"Are ye hurt bad, lad?" he asked.

Jared shook his head. "Only a slug through the shoulder. I'll mend in time," he said, "But I've had a feeling for days that this was to be my last campaign."

"I'm thinking it's near the last campaign of the war," another voice broke in. Colonel Marinus Willett had ridden up, the snow lying heavily on his faded blue cloak and his heavy face pinched with the cold. "We'll call off the pursuit here, lads. But few of the remaining raiders will ever live to make their way through the wilderness to Fort Niagara in this weather. We've smashed them this time for fair, and the frontier should be safe at last. Well—some of you make a litter to carry Jared, here, back with the other wounded."

Riding a few yards further along, Willett halted at the ford and sat looking down at the body of the Tory leader that lay half in the water and half on the snow-covered bank. The Oneida had taken the scalp, and the snow around the dead man's shattered head was crimson.

"So there lies Walter Butler!" Willett said with deep satisfaction. He reversed his saber, to drop it ringing into the scabbard. "He rides no more!"

BOND BOY

By WILLIAM R. COX

This was Comanche country, and the terrible Jornada lay ahead. It was no ordinary expedition, but the great Ashby's big train for Santa Fe. Twenty-two wagons, seventy-four men, the fair young Priscilla Ashby—and one runaway from plantation bondage.

JOE sat and listened as the fire sparked high. Kentucky said, "The Comanche is the wustest . . . But if ye know the signs, mebbe they'll parley. Once a-talkin' they ain't so bad. But they'll cross ye and take yer hair if they're a mind to . . ."

Hal Gates was sitting near the Ashbys, smiling a little. Joe kept watching the young man from Boston. The fine linsey jacket hung carelessly on wide shoulders, the curling beard was blond and virile and clean upon Hal's strong jaw. He was a greenie, like Joe Anthony, but he was a god, too.

Simon Ashby said, "Bedtime . . . We've got to make that water hole tomorrow . . ." He spoke easily, without trepidation, but the experienced mountain men did not sing their weird songs this night. Joe was quick about such things. He was a tiny atom in this strong party, a member only by the sufferance of Ashby and the mountain men, but he was quick . . .

He sought his post near the outer wagons of the square. This was Comanche country, between the Arkansas and the Cimarron, and they had been low on water for two days. He found a pebble for his cotton-dry mouth. The wagons were huge bulks, the best that could be bought. This was no ordinary expedition. This was Ashby's big train for trade with the Spaniards in the great year of 1831 . . . Santa Fe bound. There were seventy-four men, and animals for twenty-two wagons loaded with Yankee notions, shawls, crepes, bombazines . . . dozens of items to exchange for Spanish silver. Seventy-four men . . . and one runaway bond boy, Joe amended.

Deserts did not frighten this caravan. They had taken the cutoff over the Jornada. It had grown terribly hot, the trail was confused with myriad buffalo tracks, but they would find the spring tomorrow and replenish the water casks and all would be well. Joe, the ex-bond boy, had been lucky to catch the favor of Simon Ashby back in St. Louis, and of old Kentucky on the way. He had worked very hard . . . but not as hard as on the Virginia plantation where he had been manacled to a black slave for insubordination when he had attacked the overseer . . .

There were footsteps near his post and he clutched the ancient flintlock that Kentucky had procured him. Then he relaxed, recognizing the figures. He went forward unwillingly. Into the starlight of the cloudless night walked Hal Gates . . . and the daughter of Simon Ashby.

She was very fair. Her father had thought nothing of bringing her with this formidable party to grace his stone house in Santa Fe for a season. She wore crinoline and city shoes, and rode always in the wagon where the sun could not scorch her white skin. Joe's dark eyes gleamed, watching the graceful way she walked beside the handsome Harvard man. They were a beautiful couple. They represented

all that the world could hold for a bond boy accustomed to poverty, filth and heavy blows . . .

Nevertheless he went forward and said softly, "It is forbidden to walk outside the wagon square, sir and lady."

"Why, Joe!" said Hal Gates kindly. "I'll take the responsibility."

"Ay, sir," said Joe, swallowing hard. "But Kentucky said the Comanches . . ."

"Perhaps he is right," said sweet-faced Priscilla Ashby. "The Indians are very bold." She smiled at Joe. Her eyes went admiringly from his moccasins to the top of his curling black hair, a distance of over six feet. Sue had looked at him like that before, and it made Joe the uneasier, as if an angel from on high had scrutinized him.

"Kentucky is a fool to alarm everyone so!" said Hal Gates without rancor. "Simon warned me about those tall tales the old mountain men tell. There are no Indians on this desert."

Joe fumbled for words. "Perhaps, sir, but the word is that we should sleep against tomorrow's sun. The mountain men all predict extremely hot going, sir. And if the Comanches . . ."

Hal's voice became sharp. "A Philadelphia lawyer, by gad! I said I would be responsible, Joe. You may lie down."

Joe whispered, "Yes, sir." He stepped back. He did not lie down. That phrase, like the bidding of a dog to behave, had lashed at him. He kept his eyes upon the girl and to his wonder saw the compassion, the understanding in her gaze.

She said softly, "Good night, Joe. Sweet dreams." Her voice was a whisper that Hal Gates did not hear as he walked away.

Hunched on a blanket, resting on his heel, Joe watched them. When they had turned the corner of the square of Conestogas, he ran forward, crouching lest they should look back. He saw Hal place his arm about the girl's waist and his heart stood still. Then she put it away, firmly, and he breathed again.

He almost forgot to look to the desert whence the riders could come. He knew old Kentucky, and the trapper had not been romancing that night. Kentucky had been telling them plain truths about the Indians, especially the Comanches. Without showing fear or worry, the trapper was wary and expectant of trouble. It stood to reason that a thirsty wagon train could become disorganized and be comparatively easy prey . . . Joe thought that out for himself, watching the animals roll their eyes as they began to thirst . . .

He heard Hal say, "But, my dear, think of the advantages of our marriage! Your father's western fortune and ours of the east could combine to make us very powerful and rich. We could travel Europe!"

The girl's reply was something Joe never heard. He had seen the first of the shadowy shapes on the desert. It was moving soundlessly, coming very close. There were others, it was immediately apparent . . .

HE knew instinctively what to do. He knew enough not to yell and force a quick attack, the seizure or death of the young man and girl who lingered in the danger zone. He knew his musket was unreliable . . . he had missed too many shots with it to trust it further.

He dropped to the sand and began wriggling, as he had seen Kentucky crawl in search of game. The days out of St. Louis had toughened him, made him aware of many things. He counted the figures who came on horseback, spotting the tips of their feathered lances against the sky . . . Four of them, a party of hardy youths, no doubt, bent on a coup.

He marked their approach and hastened. He had to cut their path yards before they could reach Priscilla and Hal. He had to be quick and deadly, and then, when it started, he would be in the line of fire

which would belch from the wagons. He knew all this, because his was a practical, cool brain. He went on, the rippling muscles on his back coiling for action. He loosed the skinning knife at his belt . . .

His spurt of speed betrayed him. He heard a grunt and saw a lance swing in the air. It was a terrible weapon in the hands of a Comanche buck, the long spear which could be thrust or thrown with tremendous speed and accuracy.

He held the musket point-blank upon the brave who had spotted him. He pulled the trigger, then threw himself sideways with the agility of a puma.

The spear sang, then plumped into earth. The Comanche screamed a death cry. Joe dimly heard Priscilla's voice in a soprano call. Then he was going in close, his knife drawn.

He got the first brave by the hair of his leggin . . . human hair from scalps taken on the Trail . . . and dragged him off the wiry cayuse. He evaded an axe blaw. He heard a gun go off and the roar of the awakening trappers and drivers. He whipped his knife into the brave's middle, fell upon the body and lay quite still.

The rifles thundered. The Comanche beneath him seemed dead, but Joe remembered what Kentucky had said about shamming and drew his blade across the red throat . . .

Then he met the charge of the third Indian, rolling and thrusting out his heels in old-country free-for-all style. The maneuver caught the diving buck by surprise. Again the rifles at the wagons crackled.

The Comanche, poised high upon the heels of the bond boy, suspended in mid-air, cried with agony. In a convulsive leap he got free. He ran two steps, then dropped like a plummet. The guns had picked him cleanly from Joe's feet . . .

Again Priscilla's voice was raised. The firing stopped, and the moon peeked through. A lone Comanche was whipping his steed, a tiny shadow fleeing in the night. Three dead Indians lay huddled on the desert.

Directly behind Joe a voice said calmly, "See ye got 'em. Take their hair . . . Looky, I'll show ye."

Joe said, "I don't want scalps, Kentucky!" His stomach turned over. It occurred to him now that he was frightened, that he had been cold with apprehension from the beginning of this action.

Kentucky scratched his beard and said, "Ye got t' larn sometime. Injuns jist nacherally hate to be skelped. Ye got t' lift their hair t' larn 'em . . ." He leaned over and Joe watched with horrified fascination.

They went back to the wagons. Someone kicked up the fire. Leather-faced mountain men silently stared at Joe. Kentucky spat into the flames and said, "Joe got three of 'em . . . T'other run."

Simon Ashby was pale, composed, a leader withal. He said, "Joe . . . you saved Prissy."

"Why . . . why . . . what else could a body do?" stammered Joe.

"Coulda raised a ruckus and got Prissy and the Gates feller murdered quick," said Kentucky.

"Joe," said Ashby heavily. "You're a fine lad. You're a quick learner . . . I'm thinking of your future, Joe. Rest assured that it is bright. I shall never forget this night, Joe Anthony." He smiled, breaking the spell, and the mountain men cheered briefly, as much from relief as anything else, and because they were, in a way, childrenu who loved a dramatic scene. Simon Ashby was extending the rifle in his hand, a long, shining, brass-mounted beauty of a hunting gun. "Meanwhile, take this as a gift in place of your old musket. You've earned the weapons of a real fighting man!"

Joe took it in shaking hands. He was close to tears now. He was not elated, he was almost frightened as at the Comanches. In all his life no one had ever spoken to him just that way. People had been kind after he had run away from the plantation. His ingenuousness and willingness had made Kentucky and the others feel and act very friendly towards him. But Simon Ashby the big trader was the first man ever to address him with respect and deep gratitude.

He was able only to gulp, "Thank 'ee, sir." Then he ran for his post and obscurity, the precious rifle nursed in his strong hands with the long, quick, nimble fingers.

Kentucky came over. He had the scalps on hoops. He sat cross-legged like an

Indian and said, "The little gal called fer us not to shoot, that you wuz out thar . . . She's frail and spindly and not fer mountain men, bein' too light in the beam. But she's her daddy's datter, and brave as they come. Whyn't ye shine up to her a leetle, Joey?"

Joe said, shocked to the core, "Kentucky, you're the craziest man in the world!"

The old trapper chuckled. "Mebbeso, ye should've seen her eyes shine when her pappy give ye the gun."

Joe said, "Besides, she's goin' to marry Gates."

Kentucky spat expressively. "Arter t'night? Ye think she didn't tell her pappy thet you warned 'em inside the wagons?"

"Gates is handsome, rich, well-dressed," said Joe. "He speaks well, he looks well. He is strong and healthy, too. Why, he went to Harvard College!"

Kentucky said, "Whoosh! I never seen a school, even. But I'm a better man than that whippersnapper . . . and so air you! Ye got to get some gumption about ye, Joey!"

Joe shook his head. He said, "I've done mighty well, thanks to you and Mr. Ashby and everybody. I'm very happy. But I know what can't be done. I'm an ex-bond boy. You don't know what that means, Kentucky. You don't know about whips and solitary, and eatin' with the slaves and carryin' slop jars and hidin' from the master's good-lookin' drunk wife. A man gets scarred, I tell ye . . . You've seen my back. Those scars go into a man's heart!"

Kentucky said calmly, "I got scars where a grizzly clawed me some . . . they're deeper'n yourn! Ye got a lot t' larn yet, Joey. Though ye're a good boy, right on . . ." He awkwardly patted Joe's shoulder and crawled away.

THE mirages became more fantastic that next day. Only the experience of the men of the caravan saved them from panic. Inviting pools of non-existent water, whole cities sprung from the waves of heat and tortured eyeballs of the beholders made a madness of that section of the Jornada. Joe rode a long-legged mule which had more endurance than many of the other thirsty beasts.

In the wagon, Prissy looked pale and unwell, but her head was high. They exchanged glances and she smiled warmly, but Joe spurred the mule past her, nodding and touching his forelock with the humble gesture of his days of bondage.

Hal Gates rode with Simon Ashby and the older men. His blond beard was crisp and his sinewy frame showed no sign of exhaustion. The wagon wheels crunched through the sand and the horizon promised water at the hole they knew . . .

Joe found himself watching Gates. The young man's easy seat in the saddle presaged physical alertness. His head was not lowered despite the occurrence of the previous night. He seemed unconscious of the scathing remarks of the mountain men, of the looks of disdain they cast upon him.

Joe shook his head. That was the way with a man like Gates. He was born to the things Joe only dimly knew enough to aspire to. He was born strong and capable and rich in every sense of the word.

The day was longer than a year of better days . . . Several times the caravan changed directions, seeking the water hole. In that expanse of desert, Joe did not see how they could possibly find it.

Then, as the sun went low and long wavering purple shadows appeared, a cry went up. Joe urged the mule to a trot, his mouth working, almost out of control now that the end of thirst was in view . . .

Kentucky was sitting beside a shallow depression. There was dampness at its very middle.

The spring was dry and choked. There would be no water then, nor any time soon. Joe stared at the old trapper and Kentucky said, "Reckon I got t' do a scout, Joey. Would ye like t' go along?"

Joey said, "Anything you say, Kentucky. Prissy's got to have water pretty soon."

Kentucky muttered, "There's strong men on this yere party will go crazy before she does . . . Thirst is a very big devil. Nothin' in this world is more inclined to make ye daft . . ."

Simon Ashby had ridden up. The others grouped around, and behind them the wagons crawled slowly, the oxen not smelling the water their masters had expected to find and therefore moving like snails, conserving with brute prescience the strength

they knew somehow that they would so sorely need to survive.

Ashby said, "There's not enough water left for another day . . . This could wreck us, Kentucky."

"I reckoned to go out," drawled the trapper.

"It's a bad job. You'll need couriers," said Ashby.

"I'm a-takin' young Joe. He's in better shape'n most any of ye. And bein' young—an' smart—he's my pick."

Joe stared at the desert sand, but he was mighty proud. Ashby said, "Then you two go on."

There was a clatter of horse's feet and Hal Gates rode up. He had been lingering with Prissy, promising her clear, bubbling water, teasing her because both knew that the spring would be heavy with alkali . . . although they also had the knowledge that it would save them. When he saw the condition of the stream his beard jutted, as though someone had cheated him. He blurted, "Confound it, this must be the wrong place!"

Kentucky said drily, "Then you find 'tother one."

"But we'll die!" cried Gates. "This is awful."

Simon Ashby said flatly, "Kentucky and Joe are ridin' in search of water. They'll bring it back if there is any ahead. Why don't you ride with them?"

Joe wanted to cry in a loud voice "No!" Then he thought that this arrogant youth would certainly not risk the precarious trip. He was amazed to hear Hal Gates say resolutely, if a bit self-consciously, "I will avail myself of that opportunity!"

The wagons came up before they left. Even the mule skinners, the toughened trappers and traders were on the verge of losing hope. Kentucky said, "Let's git outa here afore everyone begins a-weepin' and a-wailin' and a-gnashin' of the teeth . . . Thet's from the Bible, ain't it, Gates?"

The blond young Bostonian said stiffly, "I am ready to ride."

Kentucky's left eyelid drooped privately at Joe. The old, gnarled, tough mountain man seemed about to go upon a picnic. He said, "It'll be quite a ride, young feller. And ye might as well understand right now . . . ye're under my orders from the start."

Simon Ashby said sharply, "That's right! If you disobey Kentucky, we might all die before you return."

Gates said, "Of course, sir. I am ready."

They packed casks upon a small jenny. Priscilla sat in the shade of the canvas of the big wagon and looked at them. Joe caught her glance and held it for a long moment. Her eyes were like saucers and he could read something within them which almost scared him. He edged the mule close, stuttered a moment, then said, "If I don't . . . see you again . . ."

She said, "I know, Joe . . . I've felt it from the start."

He said, "You . . . know?"

"Of course!" she said. "A girl always knows. . . "

Gates rode up on his fine horse. He said, "Farewell, my love . . . no venture could be half so precious as seeking succour for your cherry lips!"

Joe drooped and rode away. Kentucky led them as they went westward, where the Cimarron flowed with the life-giving fluid which they must bring back to the caravan. . . .

THE animals were not as tough as the men. This was hard for Joe to believe, leading his mule, stumbling along. Kentucky walked ahead, his moccasin tracks in a straight line, toes pointed in like an Indian. Behind came Hal Gates, hanging onto the bridle of the horse at times, dragging one foot after the other. It was hardest on Gates. . . .

Through swollen, cracked lips, Joe whispered, "Wanta rest, Gates?" He had long since stopped saying "sir" to the Bostonian. They had come through too much together for formalities.

"Thanks, old man," whispered Gates. "I can make it. My horse. . . ."

The animal staggered. Gates flung himself aside. The horse went down to its knees, tried pitifully to arise, its tongue like a yard of pink wool, hanging down. Gates sat upon the sand, staring stupidly from bloodshot eyes. The sun unmercifully beat down. It was midday.

Kentucky drew a pistol from his belt. He did not waste time or energy in coming back the twenty yards between them. He fired once and the horse drooped its head for the last time and lay still. Kentucky

said, "Waal . . . he's out of it. Lucky animile!"

Gates got up in sections, stood swaying. He croaked, "Can we make it tonight, Kentucky?"

The old trapper shrugged. Hardship had only made him leaner, tougher, taciturn. He started westward, leading his mule. Joe followed and Gates, retrieving his arms, hung them on Joe's saddle and managed to maintain the steady pace.

Every hour was an eon. Yet Joe never faltered in his spirit. He was aware of this through the torture of his body, and his active mind was amazed. Death lay just around the corner, and worse, death lay behind for Prissy. . . . But he was unafraid.

He had, he thought, confidence in Kentucky. That was the main thing which bolstered him. The old man had been reared on the desert and in the mountains, had been rich on the beaver trade, had never been able to stay long enough from the frontier to enjoy his earnings. He was of the old, stern stuff which calmly went its way to ultimate success over whatever tremendous obstacles. Joe shrewdly pinned his faith in Kentucky. . . .

They had not deviated from the course the trapper set. Their one great fear had been that there would be more Comanches, brought by the lone messenger of disaster who had escaped. But none appeared. There came a time when even a Comanche would have been a welcome sight, because it would mean that water must be somewhere within reach. . . .

The mules, almost ready now to lie down and die, suddenly pricked up long ears. Their nostrils twitched. Kentucky's big black hee-hawed and broke into a shambling, pitiful gallop. Kentucky turned loose the bridle, turned and looked from cavernous eyes at his companions. He gestured with his skinny claw of a hand.

They could not run. They plodded forward. The stream ran muddy, but it ran before their eyes and it was not a mirage.

They wrestled Kentucky's mule away before it could founder itself. They plunged into the Cimarron, clothes and all. They did not drink deeply. They soaked the precious liquid through their skins, their dusty, filthy garments.

Then they stripped and washed and hung up their clothing on a stunted tree. It took them an hour to get to a point where they could refrain from plunging again and again under the surface of the turgid, lukewarm river. . . .

They dressed slowly. Kentucky said in his matter-of-fact way, "Waal . . . we still got a problem. Two of us hez got t' ride with the casks. There's thirsty people waitin'."

The pack mule would be loaded and could not also take a rider. Therefore, Joe realized, one of the two remaining animals would have to be ridden. That left one man to walk . . . or to wait. It would be a lonely vigil here where the Comanches must necessarily come for water. . . .

He said quickly, "I'll stay here."

Kentucky was producing jerky. He debated with himself, chewing on the dried meat. Already he seemed strong and durable as ever. . . . He said, "This takes some figgerin'. . . . As to who'd do whut the best."

HAL GATES had managed to regain his dapper appearance, his straight bearing. He had very blue eyes, Joe noted again. He said, "I will abide by your decision. . . . This has been an experience I shall never forget. I have seen hell, gentlemen. I think it has improved me very much. At least I appreciate that my companions are the best of men to their very cores."

There was no resisting his charm. Kentucky grunted, but Joe saw that the trapper was pleased. They sat on the bank of the river, enjoying the smell of it, the look of it.

Joe arose and picked up the rifle Simon Ashby had given him. He cleaned it lovingly, poured powder, slid a ball into the octagon barrel, tamped it. He said, "I could hide along the river. I'm very good at hidin'. When I ran away from the plantation even the bloodhounds could not find me."

Hal Gates averted his eyes from the brown, muscled back with its broad scars from the lash. He said, "I have a humiliating confession to make. When my horse went down I secured my gun and powder horn—but forgot the shot pouch."

Kentucky said sharply, "Thet's bad, Gates."

"There've been no Injuns," said Joe quickly. "If you ride back, you can regain the shot."

Gates tightened his lips. "If we are attacked, I shall fight them hand to hand. I admit my error, Kentucky."

"Sartain, sartain," grumbled the trapper. He lashed the casks firmly on the pack animal. "Got to git started . . . I reckon Joe kin stay. It seems best."

Joe was unconsciously lifting the rifle, sighting it. He had had little time to enjoy the new gun. He saw a bush tremble across the river and pointed the muzzle at it. . . .

And then he saw a single feather, the glint of sun upon a gleaming bow. An arrow flew through the air. His mule went down squealing.

He shouted, "Injuns! Down!"

He fired. A wild scream answered, and then there were brown men leaping and shaking bows and exultantly crying their war-whoops. There was a considerable party, Joe thought, reloading the long gun. He knelt as an arrow almost parted his hair. He shot another redskin, and the band ran for cover.

Kentucky was lashing the mule out of range and sight. He called, "Gates! Ride! Git back with thet water!"

For one instant the Bostonian hesitated. He managed to throw up his rifle and take one shot. He missed, but his resolution was cemented. He flung himself aboard Kentucky's big mule and rode.

The Comanches were as surprised as the whites, Joe thought. They did not bring up their ponies. They exploded their muskets as Kentucky led the way to a thick copse of brush. They bellowed and howled as though they could scare their enemies to death.

Gates was riding like the wind. The Comanches had not even noticed his going, as Kentucky had shrewdly hoped. He was fast disappearing on the horizon as dusk came suddenly upon the scene and both of the white men's rifles thundered against the leaping, dancing Comanches. A chieftain appeared, giving orders in liquid grunts.

Kentucky said, "Keep 'em busy . . . Gates hez got t' git clear."

Joe's fingers, trained at manual tasks, flew at the work of loading the rifle, firing at targets he could not see. His shot pouch and horn before him, he worked like a busy beaver. The chief retreated and for a moment the sound died, and then Kentucky said, "We got t' move."

Joe picked up his pouch. It was very light.

Kentucky went downriver. He picked a hill covered with small trees and brush and wormed his way to its peak. Joe followed as soundlessly as possible. Kentucky paused and said, "This is as good as anything. How much shot you got?"

Joe said, "Not too much."

Kentucky said, "Y' see? Thet's whut I mean about that feller Gates. He's an all-right cuss, sometimes. He means good as hell. But neither of us would fergit the shot."

Joe said, "He was thirsty and dead beat and he was fond of that hoss you shot."

"Excuses don't make bullets," said Kentucky. He added, "Them Comanches was shore supprized t' see us. They'll begin thinkin' any minute now, then we kin expect trouble."

Joe said, "You reckon they'll find us tonight?"

"At dawn," said Kentucky. "Jist before the sun rises. They'll come over upriver and work down and pick up our trail as easy as if we meant 'em to find us."

Joe said, "They haven't got many guns."

"They kin shoot arrers faster'n we kin guns," said Kentucky philosophically. "I bin arrer-hit. Jist as lief be shot."

Joe said, "I suppose we ain't got a chance, huh, Kentucky?"

The trapper stretched out. He said, "I'll sleep fust. You're younger'n stronger nor me. . . . We allus got a chance, Joey. Injuns air a nacheral desert hazard, like sun and thirst. We beat the one, we jist got t' fight t' other."

He was asleep in a moment, and then Joe realized how much the day had taken from even his sturdy frame. His eyelids drooped a thousand times in the hours he watched that night.

He walked around to keep awake, wearing a path in the soft bed of leaves from the trees and bushes. They had chosen the highest spot around and he could see pretty well in the starlit and pale moonlight. There seemed to be no Comanches . . . but the shadows held a million shapes.

He went back, tracing his whole existence through the weary hours. He could not remember his parents. There had been an uncle, not a bad man, but bibulous. He had sold Joe into bondage for the price of a big drunk. . . .

Well, it was all passing, as everything passed. Life went too, before a man knew it. Although, Joe thought without resentment, most men gained a mate and spent some of the time in begetting more children whose lives were an equal gamble with their forbears'. . . .

THEY came with the first grey fingers streaking the eastern sky. Now they were attacking, silent as forest beasts, ferocious as only primitive warriors can be. They slipped like tawny cats from tree to tree, firing their arrows, omitting the blood-curdling yells of the night before.

Kentucky said, "Don't miss none, Joey. We ain't got enough balls to miss none."

It was hard to hold onto the rifle and not chance a shot now and then. But the Comanches, although Plains Indians, could hide behind a sapling. The swishing of arrows was a dismal dirge in the air. They came closer . . . and closer.

One leaped out, drawing a six-foot bow, arrow notched. He had a hawk nose and was young and fiercely proud. Joe could see him plain. Joe touched the trigger of the long gun. The Comanche loosed his arrow wildly and fell.

A great paean of pain went up from the savages. Three men ran forward to seize the body of the fallen one. The chieftain, his face heavily painted, gave vent to the most outrageous of screams.

"Ye got the sachem's son," grinned Kentucky. "Look smart, now. They'll come fast!"

Their rage reaching its climax, they placed the body of the chief's son in a safe place and returned. They ran straight up the hill in a magnificent charge. They bore the lances bravely and before them they placed their bull-hide shields for protection.

Joe fired, reloaded and fired again. Kentucky was cool as though hunting turkey, alternating his shots with those of Joe's new gun. One after another the Indians tottered, turned and slid down the hillside. Four, five, six of them fell.

The chief came on, a giant, brandishing his lance. It was certain death. Yet for a moment it seemed he might win through as Kentucky fumbled in the pouch for one of the few remaining bullets.

Joe held the fine gun dead center and pulled. The chief gave a last prodigious leap and came close, throwing the spear. Then he went down and lay like a felled tree.

Kentucky said, "Whoosh! Git this pig-sticker outen me!"

Joe heard the dismayed hows of the Indians, paused with his rifle reloaded and looked at his comrade. The lance had struck into his hip. Kentucky lay on his side, his face twisted in a half-humorous grimace of pain.

With a quick, sure motion, Joe drew his knife and seized the scalplock of the chieftain who lay dead on the hilltop. He drew the circle, tore at the skin.

Then he tenderly withdrew the spear, staunching the blood with his bandanna kerchief. Kentucky said, "It'll be all right if the fever don't set in."

Joe stood erect. He picked up the gory scalp. He attached it to the business end of the chieftain's lance. He stalked forward, in plain sight of the Comanches assembled below. He thrust the butt of the spear into the loose earth and let the scalp dangle for the Indians to behold.

He bent and picked up the body of the big chief in his arms. The water and jerky and the night's rest had completely restored his strength. He heaved the Comanche above his head, bent and tossed him. The redskin, minus his hair, bounced down the slope.

The howls went all the way to the heavens, Joe thought. Kentucky called, "Thet was a stunt! Now ye got 'em!"

The Indians ran to rescue the body of the chief. Joe shot two of them as carefully as if he were in the duck blind, killing game for the master's table back in Virginia.

There was a long silence. Kentucky said, "We need water. And we ain't got any more food."

Joe said, "Are the Injuns really gone?"

"They ain't stickin' around," grinned Kentucky. "Mebbe a young buck or two might try it. But they got a heap of mournin' t' do fer the dead. Comanches is funny thet away. They prob'ly think

we're devils and they know the wagons must be comin' up. They'll run away and fight another day, them fellers."

Joe said slowly, "That's awful good news. 'Cause we ain't got a single ball left!"

Kentucky said, "Whoosh! Nary one?"

Joe shook his head. "If they try once more . . . even a couple of them . . . we only got hatchet an' knife against 'em."

Kentucky said, "I wouldn't be much good in a free-fer-all."

They sat and looked at one another. An hour passed, and Joe went down to the river. He saw no Indians. He brought back water for Kentucky's wound.

Kentucky said after awhile, "I thought I seen a couple of 'em acrost the stream."

Joe said, "Me too." He fingered his flint and steel. The idea which had been germinating in his brain took strength from the emergency. He gathered some twigs. He took the tiny crucible from Kentucky's bag. He made his fire. Kentucky watched, his eyes bright, saying nothing.

Joe found a heavy, sharp rock. He took the precious rifle Simon Ashby had bestowed upon him. He stroked it once, fondly. Then he laid it upon a large rock and beat at it with the sharp stone he had found.

Kentucky drew in his breath sharply. The brass mountings fell off the fine gun.

THE crucible bubbled merrily, melting the soft brass. Kentucky whispered, "They're sneakin' as close as they kin. It's a sorta suicide deal with 'em. They're relatives of the dead chief an' his son, prob'ly. Couldn't go back to the lodges without tryin' somethin' if they git kilt fer it."

With steady hand, Joe tipped the crucible. The molten metal lay in the mold.

Kentucky said, "They're a-comin' up the hill. The stuff won't be cool in time. . . ."

Joe handed the wounded man his gun. Joe's was no use, but Kentucky's weapon was primed and ready for the charge when it should cool. Joe said, "This is as good a way as any for a man t' die!"

He smiled. He slid behind a bush, drawing his axe and his knife. He began working downward, to where certain tiny movements had betrayed the Comanches to Kentucky's sharp, trained eyes. He could not see them, but if they came within arm's reach, he thought, he should at least have a struggle for his life.

He went slowly, as Kentucky had taught him. He waited many times in hiding spots he thought safe, hoping they would blunder into him. He found a staunch elder patch and concealed himself within it. The Comanches came.

There were three of them. They were younger than Joe, possibly, oiled and painted and grim. They were armed to the teeth with lance, knife, tomahawk and gun.

One came close to the elders and paused. Joe gathered himself together, his strong legs coiled beneath him. The Comanche sniffed the air, began to turn. Joe jumped, sprawled out, swinging the axe.

The Comanche yelled. Joe split his shoulder at the base of the neck, but went down and had to roll furiously for cover again. The other two Comanches wheeled and screamed, coming for him, pointing their guns.

From behind Joe there sounded one shot. The leading buck went down and out. The second one hesitated a moment. Joe arose and threw his knife.

The point entered the throat of the Comanche. Joe, closing in, struck with the axe. Blood cascaded over them both. The Comanche died without uttering a sound, stretching himself at Joe's feet.

Kentucky could not arise. There was a trail of blood where he had dragged himself down the hill. He stammered, "I seen 'em, and I seen you. The brass cooled quicker'n I thought. I jist got one bullet into the gun. Couldn't let ye go it alone, could I?"

Joe picked up the slight form, amazed at its lightness. Kentucky's eyes were feverish. Down at the stream he became slightly delirious as Joe bathed the wound.

He carried the trapper back to the hilltop. He reloaded Kentucky's rifle with one of the remaining brass bullets. He made the wounded man as comfortable as possible. A wild turkey gobbled and he went out and shot it.

The Comanches did not return while he was cooking the fowl. He contrived to make a broth in the crucible and fed it to Kentucky. He ate the bird and extinguished the fire as night fell. He made many trips to the river to bring water for

the hot brow of the raving Kentucky that night.

He thought many thoughts, but somehow he always returned to the gun which Ashby had given him and which he had ruined. It was, he feared, a symbol. It had been a fine gun but it was broken now. The barrel was still undefiled, the stock was staunch, the lock worked. But it could not hold together without its brass hoops.

YET when the wagons came, he was on his feet, eager, smiling. Kentucky, wan and haggard, was without fever. The riders came up, burned to a crisp, but strong with the water Hal Gates had carried safely to them. Simon Ashby took one comprehensive look at the battle scene and said to Kentucky, "I see you fought them right."

Kentucky said, "We fought 'em okay ontil we run out of bullets. Then this consarned young 'un made us some out of the gun ye gave him. . . ."

Simon Ashby said, "He is an ingenious young man."

Kentucky said, "You're consarned right, Simon. He's more'n thet. He knows eggsackly whut t' do when the dadburned time comes to do it."

Simon said, "I'm making him my factor back in St. Louis as soon as we get home. I'll give him a wagon to send over the Trail. But he can stay in my warehouse and improvise things for me. I need a man like him, Kentucky."

The trapper said, "I'd be a dead un if it wasn't fer him. Gates fergot to bring up his shot!"

"I know," said Simon. "I know."

Priscilla was drinking the fresh water from the river. Hal Gates had brought it to her. Joe, bearing the useless rifle, went past them, heading for the wagon which held the tools of the expedition. He smiled at them. They made a wonderful, handsome couple there by the Cimarron.

He was quite a few steps past them when Priscilla called, "Joe! Come back here!"

He stopped unwillingly. He went back. Hal Gates was standing very erect. The Bostonian said, "I've told Prissy all about it. Everything. How you sent me off, on the safe journey, while you and Kentucky held the Indians' attention. How you helped me when we thought we would never make the river."

Joe said, "You prob'ly exaggerated a leetle, Hal."

"That would be impossible," said Gates. He held out a hand which had grown hardened lately as he helped with the work which hitherto he had avoided disdainfully. "This trip has done a lot for me, Joe. It has taught me that a bond boy who could run away and make it stick is no longer a boy—but a far better man than I!"

The Bostonian was walking away, not looking back. Joe held the pieces of the gun in his hands and stared. Priscilla said softly, "You broke your gun?"

Joe gulped and nodded. "It's sorta like me . . . not complete!"

She said, "You mean because people have beaten you when you were defenseless? Because the world tried to make a slave of you and failed? Would that make you incomplete?"

"I've had little schoolin'," stammered Joe. "I'm ignorant of the world and its ways."

"You learn very quickly," she said. "Kentucky says so."

"I'm just out of bondage because I ran," said Joe. "If they ever caught me, they'd law me."

She said, "Joe Anthony, you put down that gun!"

He laid the pieces together very carefully upon a flat rock. The sun shone hotly as ever, but they were beneath the trees where not many hours before the Comanches had howled.

She said, "You put your arms around me, Joe Anthony, and hug me as tight as you can without crushing me. . . . You're so strong . . . I knew from the start you were so strong. . . . Why, even Hal admits you are the man for me, because I've never been the same since I first saw you. . . . You big goose!"

She was as light as thistledown, but surprisingly strong. Her hands clutched him and her lips were eager. He had one flashing thought about the gun and how he would fashion new hoops for the mounting. And then he was lost in the dream which inconceivably had come true. And the last chains of his bondage fell, never to gall him again.

Slade of the Overland

THE MAN WITH FOUR EARS

By M. E. MASON

Lone-handed, a Vigilante Committee of one, Killer Jack Slade cleared a three-hundred-mile stage run of desperado gangs. But it was a different story when he settled in Alder Gulch.

A Frontier History Feature

ON a spring morning in 1863 the little gold-digging town of Alder Gulch, Montana, stewed and seethed in an undercurrent of hot excitement.

A rumor was going by the grapevine route through every group in the town:

"Jack Slade's coming to Alder Gulch. Had you heard?"

Wherever a group was gathered, whether bar, restaurant, theater dressing room or the gaudy parlor of Moll Featherlegs and her girls, this news caused a flurry of excitement.

Restaurant owners and saloon keepers looked uneasily at their bottles, their glittering mirrors, and their bars. It was said of Jack Slade that he always entered restaurants and saloons on horseback: such a method, while interestingly spectacular, could do considerable damage to decorating schemes.

In the ornate rooms of Moll Featherlegs, the girls discussed the rumor of the arriv-

ing bad man with interest. After all, life in the gold diggings was often dull for lively young females, and the name of Jack Slade was known over the entire northwest from Kearney to the mountains.

"They say he's handsome enough to be an actor," mused one Rosebud Annie thoughtfully. "Got black hair, I've heard, and coal-black eyes. Handsome dresser, too—"

"Reckon bully Jack Slade will have money to buy a lot of drinks," surmised Little Daisy, surveying her gold-colored hair in a tarnished hand mirror. "A man that's cleaned out as many thieves and robbers as he did along the Overland Stage Line is bound to have something in his wallet."

"They say he's a perfect gentleman when he's not drunk," added a blue-eyed young lady in a frock of very pink silk. "I've heard he's got a tenor voice just as sweet as any you ever listened to on the stage."

Moll Featherlegs rather rudely dispelled the romantic dream which seemed to be lurking in the blue eyes.

"Don't go raising yourself up false hopes, Lilly Belle. Jack Slade's got his wife with him. He's taken up a hay ranch and built a stone house on it and he's got his wife set up in it like a lady . . . Name's Virginia. Dale Station over on the Union Pacific in Wyoming is named for her. Jack changed the name to Virginia because that's where he married her and first lived with her."

While the ladies of the town might discuss the more romantic aspects of the late arrival, the men were interested in him from the sterner viewpoint of his other achievements.

He was a killer, was this Jack Slade; known variously as "Al," "Alf," "Jack," "Joseph," and "bully Jack." Slade of the Overland; he had built a name for himself in the days when the Overland Stage Company was pounding its way over the unbroken prairies and the desolate plains and was being robbed into bankruptcy by gangs of desperadoes. Jack had been division agent for the Overland State at Julesburg, Colorado. It was his assigned job to bring law and order to a three-hundred-mile stretch of a country celebrated for desperate characters. It was on that job that he had earned his reputation, his names, his peculiar title of "the man with four ears."

Lone-handed, a Vigilante committee of one, Jack Slade had cleared the three-hundred-mile stretch of thieves. In this achievement he had slain at least fifty men, seeming to find a cold, ruthless delight in the slaying. Like all gunmen of the time, he was uncannily skilful with the pistols. He could hit a tin can, tossed into the air, two or three times before it fell, and keep it rolling afer it fell. He could clip off a man's coat button at twenty yards distance. A coin, tossed in the air, would spin from the impact of his two guns before it reached the ground. Bully Jack was a gunman of the first order.

He did so well with his job of hanging, shooting, or otherwise disposing of the thieves on his division of the Overland that he was transferred to the next division where he continued his victorious way.

But Jack could not stand power.

By the time he had cleared the second division of the Overland Stage of its thieves, Jack was more than a little drunk with his own power and his ability to kill. He forgot that there was any power above him, and defied the military authorities. This resulted in his discharge as a Vigilante of the Overland.

So Jack had come, with the dashing Virginia, his wife, to live on a hay ranch out of Alder Gulch. Slade of the Overland, the man with four ears.

A CLATTERING of hoofs brought tingling attention to the barroom habitues. In a minute two strangers came in. It was the woman, rather than the man, which identified the pair. For the man, to all appearances, was a gentleman; quiet and soft-speaking, courteous except for a certain exaggerated and patronizing swagger.

The woman was beautiful in a bold and dashing way. Tall she was, beside Jack's tallness, with a voluptuous figure. Her eyes were coal-black; her hair black with a crow's-wing shimmer. Her belt, with its two derringers, girdled a buxom waist line. in her dark eyes was adoration for this man who was her hero, and for whom she would fight to the finish.

They sat down at the bar, and the tender brought their drinks which they finished off

with a flourish. When it came time to pay, the visitor reached into his pocket. With a grim smile, he held out his hand to the bartender. The man drew back with a gasp.

"The drinks are yours, mister," he managed breathlessly. "Glad to serve you any time. . . . Will you have another?"

The woman answered. "No, thank you kindly, that'll be all for the present. We just wanted to come in and introduce ourselves to you. We're your new neighbors—Slade of the Overland and Mrs."

When they had departed, the bartender broke into volubility.

"It was him, all right—Jack Slade of the Overland. Know what that was he held out to me? . . . It was a couple of ears—Old Jules Beni's ears?"

"Guess them ears'll buy Jack all the drinks he cares to accept anywhere in Nevada," grinned a teamster, leaning on the bar.

The story of Jack Slade and his two extra ears was another Overland legend, always told when Jack's name was brought up; doubted by some, yet helping to clothe the name of Overland Slade with its evil tradition.

Old Jules Beni, the Frenchman, had been at the stage station which bore his name for awhile before Jack Slade was placed there to be agent for the Division. Julesburg was the junction between the main Overland line and the new Denver branch. It was a town which well deserved its title of "Hell on Wheels"; a fit center for the bloodstained territory of the northwest. It was a hamlet celebrated for its desperate characters, and finding its amusement in drinking, carousing and reckless shooting. Boots Hill was the name of its cemetery; an important place, for seldom a day passed that Boots Hill did not add a new member to its occupants — each member distinguished by being laid away with his boots on!

To this notorious haunt came Jack Slade, who already had somewhat of a reputation when he arrived, and was ready and willing to build up that reputation.

Old Jules had been at Julesburg for a long time; naturally enough he resented the arrival of this despotic new agent who immediately took charge and began having things his own way. After a sharp dispute over some of the company supplies one day, Slade put old Jules out. The peppery Frenchman waited only a few days before he waylaid his rival and put a bullet through him. By way of good measure, he added several loads of bird-shot, and hurriedly dumped his enemy into a dry-goods box ready for burial.

But Jack Slade had other ideas about his burial. He was not yet dead, and he revived enough to sit up in his goods-box coffin and make a vow to old Jules that he would live to wear the two Beni ears upon his watch-charm.

Old Jules, defeated, departed thereafter for the west, but Jack Slade did not forget the vengeance he had sworn. As Slade continued in his work of destroying stage thieves, advancing further west, he kept a lookout for the old Frenchman, never forgetting that he had sworn to have his ears.

Finally one day Overland Slade found Jules at a ranch near Fort Laramie where he had stopped to feed and water his horse. Bully Jack quickly seized his old enemy and tied him against the corral. Seizing a pistol, he fired, and before old Jules had time to make a vain plea for mercy, he was dead.

When Jack Slade rode away from the ranch, two extra ears dangled from the gold watchchain across his vest.

This act, recounted by the scared bystanders who had witnessed it, spread across the northwest like wildfire. Overland Jack became a noted character.

His notoriety, however, went to his head like whiskey and made a maniac of him. Murder was a sport to him; something which he did not only in the line of duty, but also for recreation. Sometimes he tied his victims to a stake and used them as targets, as he had done with old Jules. Sometimes he had them hanged. In a few instances he did the hanging himself.

It was this man who came with Virginia, his wife, and took up the hay farm a few miles out of Alder Gulch.

VIRGINIA was one of Slade's three passions; the other two being drink and a lust for power. She alone might have had a good influence upon him, for she loved him with a fierce loyalty, and his love for her was the good thing in

his life. When Slade got drunk he was a fiend, whether his drunkenness was brought about by alcohol or desire for power. When sober, he was quiet and gentlemanly. His life on the hay ranch was a turn in the road for him. He might have made good, and the past record, in that raw new country where gun-law was the law, would not have been held against him.

But life soon became dull for him on the hay ranch. Just for fun, he took to shooting up the towns, first getting good and drunk. He would ride into Virginia City or Nevada, breaking windows, destroying property, starting fights, and threatening to kill respectable citizens.

"I'm Slade of the Overland," he would roar drunkenly, as he dashed through the town at the head of the rough gang which he had recruited, "I am the Bad Man from Bitter Creek!"

When he went even further and began to brag about being a member of the Vigilante Committee, the Popular Court intervened. Jack's brags were bringing the Vigilantes into disrepute, they were threatening the peace of Alder Gulch by giving the citizens a contempt for the Vigilantes as represented by Overland Slade. The Executive Committee of the Vigilantes held a special meeting to discuss this threat to organize law.

Perhaps because Jack, in his way, had helped to bring about this very law which he now defied, some of the men went to warn him.

"Leave town, Jack. Get on your horse and ride out to your ranch and Virginia."

More the men would not say. It was morning. Jack was tired and ready, for the moment, to accept the warning. He got on his horse and started off. But on the way home, he yielded to the temptation to have a couple of drinks. As usual, the fiery liquor roused him into a mad, fighting demon. He swaggered back to the judge of the Popular Court, mocked, defied, and finally waved a derringer at him.

"So you think you'll arrest me! Me, Overland Slade! Me, the Bad Man from Bitter Creek. . . . I've a notion to pin you on my watch chain, along with the old Frenchman's ears!"

This was the last straw. The judge had attempted to reason with Jack; had told him to go on home before it was too late. But now Jack had openly defied the Vigilante law.

WORD was sent out by secret messenger. It was not long before Jack Slade looked out from his jail window to behold a blood-chilling sight. Six hundred Vigilantes were marching in double column up to the jail. They had agreed upon what they had to do. They had come to hang Jack Slade.

Jack's drinks had worn away now. He was sober and he was terrified and repentent. On his knees he begged to be spared; promised to reform. But he had waited too late.

"Only let me live for my wife's sake —for Virginia!" he begged.

"You should have thought of that before," was the inexorable answer.

So Jack, the bad man, was led forth to die. He begged for them to send for Virginia so he could see her once more.

"She can come and see you—afterwards!" the grim-lipped judge decreed.

And so, when the black-eyed beauty came speeding up to the scaffold, she found her husband lying in his last sleep in the jail. Already the noose had done its work and Jack Slade was dead.

Weeping, Virginia fell across the body of the man she had worshiped. Then she turned, with flaming eyes, upon the men about her.

"You had no right to kill him like that!" she stormed. "He did not deserve to die like a dog, strung from a tree. . . . You might at least have shot him!"

They helped her to lift the body to a horse, and she rode back to the home which had been too dull for Slade of the Overland. The shamefulness of his death rankled in her heart.

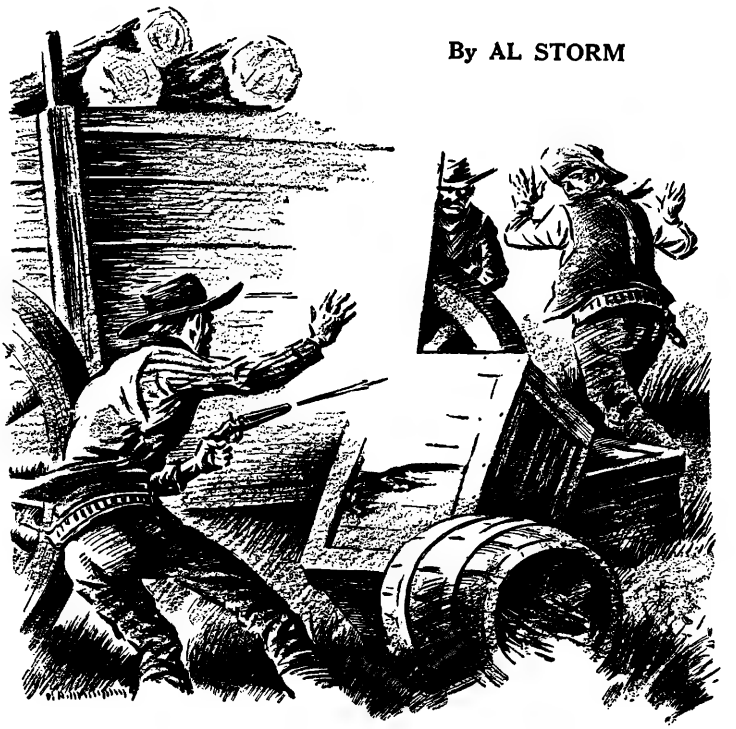
"At least he shall have a suitable burial," she resolved.

She had a metal coffin constructed, and this she filled with alcohol. Into this strange crypt she placed the body of her beloved Jack where it was preserved until the weather was suitable for traveling. Then she took it to Salt Lake, where it was interned with suitable pomp.

So died Overland Slade, wild man of the wild West.

Colt Queen of Guerrilla Pass

By AL STORM



The odds were high enough against a Union spy in Secesh wilderness. But Teton Jackson was up against more than that . . . He had to find, before he could destroy, the gun ring that hoped to seize Colorado as guerrilla loot.

THE sudden smashing thunder of gunfire drummed against brush-lined ribs of the shallow draw and tore Teton Jackson's drowsiness into ribbons. Startled, his lean-fingered left hand flicked backward to rest on the heavy Dragoon pistol at his thigh even while his right made a move toward readying a saber. Then the stern-visaged rider remembered that his was a mission no longer openly connected with the Union Army. He was not wearing his blues or carrying a saber.

Vigilant and cautious, Teton Jackson stared swiftly about the brown hills, then eyed the previously unnoticed pillars of smoke climbing Colorado's sky. For a moment he sat hesitant. Then the dry, hot wind shivered with the fury of a Sioux war-cry. Teton snapped his big black stallion about and headed for the rim of low hills that hemmed him in.

High July sun burned white and hot

A Novelet
of Secession Days

Jackson checked the play almost before it began. The first of the two riders reeled.

against Jackson's doeskin jacket and the tight-fitting pants which had replaced his Army blues. Wind picked at his chin-strapped flat-brim hat. He looked no different than a hundred other Colorado brush-country citizens except that he had a lean, tall straightness that drew attention, and he rode with his belly pulled in and shoulders squared against the world. Rawhide and gristle from hair down.

Just below the ragged skyline, Teton pulled in and eased ahead on foot with caution born of grim Union Army experience. The buckrush betrayed no movement as he wormed through it and peered into the next valley. His long lips curled down thin and white-edged.

Two wagons of a telegraph wire-stringing outfit stood tongue to end-gate against the blunt shoulder of the next big hill. A deadly half-circle of spitting rifles and whining Sioux bowstrings ringed them in as the Indians crept through the brush afoot. A third wagon was a nest of flames down the valley, and behind it brush was heaped against the long string of poles, and fire licked fiercely into the tinder-dry pine poles.

Sight of the furtively flitting shapes on foot brought a low, surprised curse to Teton Jackson's tight-set jaws. Sioux Indians did most of their fighting from horseback, yet these redskins were fighting like Quantrell's renegades.

But the General had made Teton Jackson's orders plain. The Union had far too much at stake for Jackson to risk his life in any affair other than one directly connected with his mission of unearthing the gun ring that was stirring up the redskins and supplying them with arms. That mission in itself was chore enough for any hard-bitten soldier, and dangerous enough even for the wild Teton Jackson. For the Finger Rock region of Colorado was a blood-soaked outlaw country whose renegade riders would cut down on any man who sought to bring law and order into the gold camps regardless of whether they wore the Blue or the Gray.

Another devasting volley of screaming lead tore into the besieged wagons as the Sioux crept closer. Horses went down, their screaming agony piercing the howlings of the Indians. A scattering of shots made futile answer, and even that wavered as the redskins poured in another withering volley.

The Union Army man's lips were colorless as he watched. But he was trained as a soldier and he had his orders not to mix in. Then the cold blue of his orbs turned smoky black and he canted his head in careful listening. The Sioux fired another volley. Teton Jackson smiled mirthlessly to himself and scurried for the rifle under his saddle fender.

Those attacking Sioux were now a definite figure in his mission to Colorado. Along with their white-man fight tactics, they were using a white man's guns—new Spencer carbines! And Spencer carbines could reach them only through the renegade outlaw gun-ring!

A QUICK searching glance over the dull brown roll of hills assured the Army man room for strategic retreat if needed. He turned toward the action just as a flicker of movement caught the corner of his eye. Flinging himself flat in the brush, the Army man stared from cover toward where a fourth wagon was racing through the hills half a mile northward. Then it stopped in a low coulee. Teton Jackson could barely see it from his position on the hill crest, so he knew it was safe from prying eyes of any in the valley.

Then the rising fury of shooting took his attention away, and he jerked the Henry rifle from its sheath and slid back over the hill top toward the scene of attack.

A quarter way down the slope, the Eighteen-shooter poked like a stealthy finger from the thick verdue. The sights lay against a feathered figure four hundred yards across the valley. A flash—a noise undeteched in the bedlam of sound surrounding the wagons—and the Sioux writhed and was still. Teton Jackson's lips curled back as he shifted the rifle to take in a second gesticulating shape. Recoil shoved against the Union man's shoulder, and the second shape slipped limply out of sight.

For a moment startled, bewildered silence clamped a lid across the valley. Then a faint cheer sounded from the wagons. Lead pecked through the buckbrush and showered splintered twigs against Jackson's arm. Instantly he was slithering sideways through brush that cracked and

snapped under the searching hail from modern Spencer carbines.

The Henry rifle leveled and spat its defiance. Almost before the echo had died, sand spattered into Jackson's face as the raging Sioux warriors spotted him again. He rolled desperately, not stopping to move quietly. Hot lead in a screaming hail followed him, lost him, took up the search again as he shot down another Sioux, and yet another.

But the Indians tired of facing a flank attack of unerring rifle fire. They faded away like skulking coyotes, and the long valley was suddenly empty of them. Only the piling smoke pillars and the scream of wounded horses told of the marauding visit But wily from grim experience, Teton Jackson laid low and scanned the hills for sign of the retreating Sioux.

Then suddenly a curse jammed into his throat and he stared unbelievingly. The Indians who had skulked around the wagons on foot now suddenly appeared on horses far to the north and were making toward the lone wagon stopped there. Even while Teton watched, that wagon started fleeing. But the Sioux veered toward it exultantly. and wagon and Indians passed from sight into the swirling folds of hill country.

Whistling his black stallion to him, Teton mounted and rode slowly down the slope toward the wagons. Distrust prickled his skin like the sting of nettles. If a gun-ring wanted to contact warring Sioux, what better way than by a mock attack? Not even sight of the jagged, smouldering stumps of telegraph poles or the twisted wires proved anything. But when Jackson saw the dead men he knew that the fight wasn't faked. A gun ring might sacrifice material and horses for appearance sake, but they wouldn't offer up tough fighting men on the off chance that some stranger might be looking on and wonder why Sioux and whitemen were so friendly.

"Howdy," he said as he cantered up to the beleaguered wagons. "First time I ever barged into Sioux in this neck of the country. Some little howdy-do while it lasted."

A skinny redhead turned glass-green eyes his way. A wide grin split his freckled brown face which still glowed with boyish excitement from the battle.

"Ain't it so?" the redhead grinned lightly.

"Light and stretch your saddle kinks," a droopy-mustached old teamster invited. "We got a few bullet holes to waste good tobaccy on afore we chin. Nothing like Kentuck-plug to draw the pizen outa bullet hole." The oldtimer ruminated and spat reflectively. "Sioux injuns cavortin' around on foot and shootin' into stock they was primed to take away from us! Don't make sense. Hey, Scrag!"

Scrag had muscle-balled shoulders and a thick nose. He stood near the rear wagon and eyed Teton Jackson belligerently from hat crown to moccasins, his red face roiling darkly.

"This feller saved the telegraph line for Miss Trudy Pearson," the redhead put in quickly. Then when Scrag turned abruptly and disappeared behind the wagon, followed him. The old teamster sighed.

"Too bad you lost that one wagon," Teton Jackson put in. "The Sioux headed square for it after they pulled out here. Reckon this Miss Trudy person had a damn fool driver, because the fellow stopped when he coulda got clear."

The oldtimer spat again and cocked a bird-keen eye up at the slouched figure of Teton Jackson. "We didn't have nary nother wagon out here fixin' wire them Sioux varmints cut."

The Union Army man looked into the hills to mask his flaring interest. The oldtimer hadn't made further mention of Trudy Pearson, whoever she might be. But that talk of Sioux Indians cutting the telegraph line sounded phoney as a lead dollar. But despite the hot scent he went cautiously.

Casually the Union agent repeated, "Them Sioux were hi-tailing it after a wagon."

" 'Tweren't ourn," the oldtimer insisted. "Reckon them redskin varmints took to usin' a wagon just like they took to shootin' a rifle volley fire and going into a fight on foot instead of riding and hooting like mad!"

Teton Jackson twisted uneasily in his saddle as the shrewd old veteran of the high plains called the strangenesses of the fracas. Such an acute observer would prove an invaluable ally, the Army man knew and besides being a well of informa-

tion the old man would give a stranger good excuse for hanging around the country. It would be hard to hide anything from the old coot, but neither would anything else remain hidden from him for long.

"Reckon this wire-stringin outfit could use a no-good wandering jasper like me?" Teton asked bluntly.

The oldtimer looked over the lean length of the Union Agent with careful inspection, meeting the hard blue eyes, noting the wide mouth and the stern clefts that made lines deep around his lips and nostrils.

"Reckon Miss Trudy Pearson could say, seein' as how she's roddin' this outfit now that her brother is dead," the oldster nodded, holding out a rough palm. "This old coon is knowed as Tobac Williams from some little foofarawin' I've drawed knife steel in down New Mex way."

"Well, you're still kicking," Teton laughed.

"So far," the oldster muttered ominously. "Just so far."

II

JACKSON slid off his black stallion and pitched into the heartrending chore of tending bullet-shot horses. He worked shoulder to shoulder with the tough-bitten, hard-eyed men who were gambling their lives on getting a telegraph wire through to Finger Rock. Most of them were almost unaware of the service they were doing the Union by linking the goldcamps with the East, Teton Jackson found out. But they knew that Miss Trudy Pearson would lose everything in the world if she couldn't meet the time clause in her construction contract, and for her they were giving their all.

The Union man listened with tight lips, and he began to wonder about this woman who had assumed her brother's obligations when he died. Probably one of those horse-faced, bony women who yelled hoarsely and were a veritable dynamo of energy and noise.

Tobac Williams came sauntering into camp with his face grimly twisted. "Wondered why them redskin varmints liked to crawl in the bresh so well," he snorted. "Only they ain't redskins—they's white men wearin' Sioux warpaint!"

Stunned silence gripped the men as they instantly comprehended the ghastly import of the oldster's talk. Tobac Williams went on hoarsely. "Two o' them renegades lay dead out there in the bresh. I left them fer coyotes. But they's nary a sign of long-guns. Reckon the rest of the pack toted them off."

"New Spencer carbines," Teton Jackson observed under his breath. "Guns from the gun-ring."

The redhead looked up, his grin wide and as devoid of mirth as a diamondback's rattle. "You tell a gun by the noise it makes?" he asked. "Or you got other ways and reasons for knowing?"

Teton Jackson saw that he had made a slip and got himself on dangerous ground. Mention of the new Spencers and the gun ring had prodded the redheaded wire-stringer out of his habitual good humor.

"The noise told me," Teton Jackson said, and then he switched to a safer subject. "How come you're back here with the wagons when I can see the line is built on ahead?"

The redhead's green eyes flashed like clear, brittle glass. "Seems like the Indians have a powerful interest in this line not reaching Finger Rock—or maybe it's whites playing Indian! Anyway they ain't above cutting the line behind us and beefin' a man or three."

The Army man found himself looking out over the hills with feigned disinterest. He could feel the cold green orbs of the redhead studying him. Red Hartwig slapped his palm hard against the sixgun hanging low on his leg and strode away. The grim caravan started along the brush lined valley, four horses to the lead wagon. The other trailing behind.

"That Red Hartwig ain't a boy," Tobac Williams grunted pointedly. "He heard you whisper. He can hear maggots working inside a dead horse over to Nebrasky. Got them kind of ears. Why, it was him as knowed they was only one rifle cutting loose up on the hill when the Sioux and most of us thought it was a regular army."

Tobac Williams was riding beside the wagons aside a bony-ribbed claybank. He motioned for Teton Jackson to climb his stallion and ride out. Together they moved on ahead and swung up the surging roll of a huge blunt hill. On the far side, the

telegraph main camp was laid in a shallow wash where seepage water made a mark of green verdue against the dusty brown of the hill country.

A shrill cry went up when the wagons hove into sight behind the two advance horsemen. A handful of riders charged out from the main camp.

"Redskins again," Red Hartwig called gruffly, his green eyes flashing warning to Teton Jackson. "Got Blinky and Jiggs first off. Tompkins is riding the rear wagon, bad hit." Still making no mention of the renegades dressed as Sioux, Red Hartwig continued, "Reckon every Indian west of Fort Leavenworth is shootin' us up and bent on stopping this telegraph line."

The telegraph crew sat sullen-jawed. Hot eyes pried at the rim of hills as though searching for a focal point upon which to vent the helpless anger seething within them.

"We'll need a load of poles and a couple spools of wire," the oldtimer Tobac Williams added stoically. "Back to that ring-necked valley. I'll fresh up my eatin' tobaccy and join ye." He grabbed Teton Jackson and hustled him off toward a tent before which was hung a huge flag—the Stars and Stripes, not the seven stars and three bands of the Confederacy.

Looking back over his shoulder, the Union man saw the red-faced Scrag nodding his way and making bold talk. The flow of expressions that twisted the man's face betrayed his animosity.

"Who's my red-faced friend?" Teton Jackson prodded the hurrying oldtimer. "And what's he pawing the dirt about?"

Tobac Williams didn't look back. "That's Scrag Scurley of Missouri," he grunted. "Scrag was a buddy to Trick Pearson, Trudy's brother. Trick Pearson was bushed some ten days back, and Scrag ain't holding with strangers. He's riding to see that this line gets to Finger Rock. And he's plumb pizen with a belt gun!"

Teton nodded. He glanced again at the huge flag and started to grin. That old flag was good to see floating out in the wilderness of lawless Colorado.

THEY stopped before the tent. A slender young woman leaned against a flimsy table, one shapely ankle thickly bandaged, the other booted. A tormented shadow was in her deep purple eyes and throwing its shade across her oval face. She started forward and flinched as the hurt ankle refused to bear her weight.

"Miss Trudy," the old man said gently. "This long-geared younker pulled a passel of Sioux varmints off the wagons and saved our hair. I told him you'd give him a chance to eat regular for a spell while he drags telegraph wire into Finger Rock with us."

The woman cast a pair of grave, dark blue-purple eyes upon Teton Jackson, and he felt his jaws grow numb and taut. So this was the Miss Trudy Pearson! Still gravely regarding him, she brushed an annoying insect away, ruffling the misted spray of her long hair flashing in the sunlight like aged, burnished copper. The soft line of her lips relaxed in a friendly smile that showed even white teeth. She held out her hand.

"I reckon it's a fair swap," Teton forced himself to mutter harshly, pretending not to notice her extended palm.

A surge of color made deeper the gold-tan of her countenance. Her beauty was like a shocking blow in the solar plexus, and Teton Jackson fought against smiling, fought against weakening before it. He was miserably aware that his rebuff had stung her. But his was a hard and lonely job. The trail of the outlaw gun-ring might even lead into her telegraph camp. And because it would be less painful that way, he remained cold-eyed and stern before her. Tobac Williams frowned.

"You are welcome to eat, suh," she said slowly with the soft politeness of the deep south. "But about working I don't know. A lot depends upon this line reaching Finger Rock. The right men can put it there. The wrong can stop it forever."

Teton Jackson looked over her shoulder at the Stars and Stripes hanging before her tent. She saw his glance and shot a swift look toward Tobac Williams. The oldster nodded slightly.

A slight chill of warning sped up Teton Jackson's back. The hard, impassive shell of his face gave no indication that he was aware of the exchanged glances. He looked at this woman who was obviously of the South, the old teamster who might be anything, and the Union flag hanging behind the woman.

"My brother was killed because of his beliefs," the woman said slowly. "He buried his feelings until we got this telegraph through, but that didn't save him. I'm not asking that it save me." Suddenly her face grew stern and cold with determination. "But this telegraph line is American, civilization moving into the lawless nothing of the west. I can't let blood and killings stop it." She paused briefly, then added: "Nor killers, either!"

She smiled fleetingly in an effort to show him that her reluctance held nothing personal. Her veiled talk made plain which side the Mason-Dixon line her sympathies favored. But the stark, bald assertion that the line was going on into Finger Rock also made plain that the war was not yet figured into her plans where the telegraph was concerned.

Teton Jackson watched her covertly while he appeared to scan the little camp. Trudy Pearson obviously knew that the wire reaching the unsettled gold camps around Finger Rock would have a tendency to solidify opinion and swing them into the Union camp. Men of the South wouldn't like that. Nor would the lawless gangs whose safety in isolation would be stripped from them. Against her own admitted sympathies and in face of both forces hating the line, she was stretching wire. That was the face of it. But beneath that face . . .

BEFORE the Union man could make suitable answer, a clatter of hoofs sounded down the valley. A few men shouted lusty halloos. Tobac Williams spat callously into the sandy dust and slanted a quick, sideways glance of disgust at the girl.

A rider pulled up before the tent, a thick-set, fleshy-jowled man with full lips and a sardonic nose that jutted above a trimmed black mustache. He leaped down with a springy lightness and swept his hat low in a sweeping bow.

"Danged show-off," the oldster muttered. "Trying to jump around like a moonstruck kid." He prodded Teton Jackson in the ribs. "Take a squint at Editor Dickens. You'll find him underfoot a lot —if you're here."

Editor Dickens ignored the two men. "Tough luck, Trudy," he called gustily. "Why the devil don't Lincoln or Davis send soldiers to protect this country if they both want it bad enough to fight over?" Then his tone calmed slightly. "This is hard country and the Indians resent the white man's encroachment. We have men and enough gold in the west. We could have our own army. Or hire one. We wouldn't have to beg help if independent."

The woman nodded wearily. She let Dickens take her hand briefly, but when he meant to hold it overlong she drew back slightly.

Teton Jackson felt his spine stiffen at the bald insinuations of the man's talk. He slipped into the breech with a sharp whispered half-tone: "You mean you want guerrillas?"

The thick-set editor whipped about as though a rattler had sounded under his bootheels. He glanced briefly at Tobac Williams, then stared bleakly at the Union Army man. Teton heard the shuffle of hoofs behind him and saw suddenly that Dickens hadn't come alone. Two hatchet-faced gunnies were sitting their mounts watching him. Both carried bundles of papers tied to their cantles.

"You calling for another Quantrell?" Teton pressed icily. "Troops to protect the people from Indians, yes. But a marauding bunch of cutthroats, no! Or isn't law and order what you want for this new western country?"

Dickens glared. Then Trudy Pearson said quickly, "This is Mister Jackson. He helped Tobac and Red hold off some Indians."

Dickens nodded curtly and turned back to the uneasy woman. "I understand, Trudy," he said, laying his claim openly by his constant use of her given name. "Why don't you let me take over the wire? You can go into Finger Rock where it's safe and let that ankle heal. This is no life for a lady with a sprained ankle, fighting Indians, living with a construction crew where any kind of riffraff can stop in." He glared at Jackson with his last words.

Trudy Pearson smiled faintly, her eyes flicking questioningly from Dickens to the frowning indolence of Teton Jackson.

"It's my job now since Trick died," she said gamely. "If I don't reach Finger Rock on time I lose everything. And any-

way I want the wire to go through. I'll make or break with it, but I won't pull out."

The editor shrugged his thick shoulders. "You always were stubborn, Trudy." Then he waved to his two cronies who still sat their saddles, slitted eyes fastened unveeringly upon the alertly watching Teton Jackson. "Give out them papers, boys," Dickens called. "I brought some extras again today," he told the woman. "I hope you don't mind." The editor slanted a sly glance at her.

Trudy Pearson hesitated, and Teton Jackson got the strange impression that she did mind. The editor's bombast about a free and independent west didn't quite set with her. But she waved her hand wearily. The two Dickens' riders went through camp handing papers to all who would take them. And Teton Jackson was surprised to note that many refused them.

Tobac Williams took one, glanced at it, and then tossed the sheet angrily aside. Editor Dickens chuckled jeeringly. Teton Jackson retrieved the discarded paper. Then his silent surprise turned from disbelief to cold, raging fury.

The front page was black with swollen headlines depicting the rout of Union armies in the east. General McClellan was scourged for inefficiency and corruptness. General Scott was plainly called a doddering old idiot; not even the President was left untainted. There was a loud appeal for formation of a free west, one removed from both warring factions. The rest of the paper was devoted to a gory detailed account of Indian outrages.

With a hoarse snort of disgust, Teton Jackson ripped the sheet into shreds. Editor Dickens stopped chuckling suddenly and stood watching. Both the newspeddlers rode up and eyed the Union man from their saddles, hand conveniently close to low holstered sixguns. The air grew hot and dry and hard to breathe.

"You don't like it?" the editor taunted thinly. "You figure a man should lie in times like these when the redskins with bows and arrows and cheap makeshift rifles are driving us out of a land neither Lincoln nor Davis will protect?" His eyes grew beady and unreadable.

Teton Jackson saw the barbed challenge that lurked in the editor's misleading quietness. Both horsemen began edging apart to catch him with deadly crossfire should shooting start. But the sting of open, flaunted secession goaded the Army man unmercifully.

"You've already lied," he croaked horsely. "That paper is packed with lies from front to back. And the Indians aren't fighting with bows and arrows. They raided the wagons this morning with the newest carbines available."

The editor paled while tiny red spots of rage burned high on each clamped jaw.

"You've got reasons for thinking so?" he probed sneeringly. "Or is it just that you're too bullheaded to see the truth and know we're being the victim of crooked politicians and yellow soldiers?"

Hot retorts surged against Teton Jackson's tightly locked jaws. He couldn't tell this renegade editor what he knew, or how he knew. It was what Dickens was fishing for, but it would announce the presence of a Union man in Colorado and spoil any hope of catching the gun-ring unawares.

But it was no time for talk.

From the edge of his eye, Teton saw the apparent innocent encirclement attempted by Dickens' men. In another split-second they would have him pinched in. As if to further convince him, one of the riders let his hand drift down to ride on his pistol.

Teton whipped quickly to one side and gave a long, lithe bound that left him poised where he could cover both men from the side. One of the horsemen pulled a gun and Jackson drew blurringly.

"Watch him!" the editor screamed hoarsely. "He's going to kill us all!"

TRUDY PEARSON screamed faintly. One horseman spurred straight at the crouched Army man, the other slanted across the brushy ground to flank him. Teton saw that Trudy Pearson had stifled her scream with the back of her fist and was staring wide-eyed as Dickens jerked a long-barrelled pistol from under his jaunty coat.

Teton Jackson checked the play almost before it began. His left hand flipped over, jetting long streamers of thundering flame. The horseman making the swing reeled and fell limp across his saddle pommel. Then the editor's gun spat flame. Teton whirled, but Dickens was standing directly in line with Trudy Pearson. The Army man dared not shoot back. Instead he cut down on the

remaining horseman with a rolling bristle of shots that hurled the man off his mount.

Then Jackson hunkered low and raced sideways, always keeping the riderless horse between himself and the shouting editor in front of Trudy's tent. Suddenly the horse veered away, and Teton Jackson saw his chance. He jabbed the Dragoon pistol forward. The hammer dropped—the gun was empty! The editor lined his own pistol on the Army agent, his face flushed and sweaty with rage and exultation at his helpless kill.

III

"RECKON there's been enough fool playin' round here," old Tobac Williams called casually. A heavy Sharps was pointed carelessly at Dickens' fancy vest. "Reckon my boots'd go through any hole this old smoker blowed in a carcass," the old timer mused pointedly.

Dickens held his fire, eyes flashing a deadly promise to see the canny oldtimer settled with. Yells of alarm rose around the camp as the echoes quit slamming back and forth between the hills. Men came running up.

"You siding this—this killer?" Dickens raged. Then he shoved his pistol out of sight as Scrag Scurley hustled up. The newspaper editor turned to the pale, still silent Trudy Pearson. "I reckon you didn't know what brand of snake you was feedin', Trudy," he said gently. "I'll forget what happened today—unless my boys die!"

Trudy Pearson nodded her thanks. Tobac Williams snorted and spat again into the dust. Dickens spun on his heel and hurried away while Scrag Scurley stood scowling and staring from the retreating editor to the watchful figure of Teton Jackson. Then he stomped over to where men were tending the bullet-shot cronies of Dickens'.

"Red Hartwig would kinda like to know what you was trying?" Red Hartwig grinned coldly. "That gun noise was too damned close to the Boss for funnin'."

"He's a killer!" Trudy Pearson charged suddenly. Old Tobac Williams raised his head with a jerk. "Fred Dickens and he were having a friendly little argument when he drew his gun to kill." She was fairly trembling with emotion. "We can't use that kind here. This wire is bringing civilization to the west, but a killer wouldn't know about a thing like civilization!"

Teton Jackson flinched at the scourging and felt his face grow numb and colorless. But he had no word of defense, and when old Tobac would have spoken, Jackson warned him to silence with a glance. The Union man's eyes shifted so that they could take in the Union flag idly swaying in the faint breeze behind this southern belle. He had faced far more devastating fire for that flag. But never had his hurt been harder to bear.

"He kin kill Injuns just as quick," the oldtimer protested directly to the cold-eyed redhead who was watching and waiting like a coiled spring. "And we need a few of them under afore we do much more than backtrack restringin' wire. You know that's been holding us back for two weeks—this wire-cuttin' business. I reckon this outfit could use a hombre who'd play it rough and tough." Tobac slanted a short glance at the stern-faced beauty. "I aim to hire him on."

Red Hartwig's unwavering surveyance did not quiver. Trudy Pearson's chin squared and her fists knotted stiffly at her sides. But the old man's gaze did not give way to her own.

"I'll put him on—startin' this morning." Tobac Williams smiled gently as his insistence brought no retort from the woman. "Sorry to ride you roughshod thisaway, Trudy," he said softly, "but wire stringin' ain't all fun. It's rough work, and I reckon this southpaw jasper kin take care of himself and some of us too."

Teton Jackson saw that she was in no way changed as she turned and hobbled into her tent. She was against him completely. And sooner or later she would get rid of him. He would have to work fast while being a member of the telegraph crew gave him a good excuse for staying in the country. And he wanted to see Dickens some, too.

In a few short sentences old Tobac explained to Red Hartwig how one of Dickens' riders had crowded the play. But he couldn't figure why Jackson hadn't told her so. Nor could Teton make clear to himself why he hadn't, nnless it was that he wasn't pouring dirt on Dickens to clean himself. Nor yet he wasn't.

Red Hartwig listened carefully. He thawed some, but the cool stand-your-distance still marked his eyes.

"This is big country," he said finally, "and filled with strange things. None of them reaches the Boss."

Tobac nodded solemn agreement. "Forget those renegades you beefed this morning when you talk to her. She doesn't know."

Teton Jackson didn't understand, but he promised to keep his mouth shut.

"It was a white fleck of scum that shot her brother in the back," Red Hartwig put in gruffly. "But she only suspects that. She doesn't know. But we know, and we know that there's whites mixin' their fingers in a lot of funny stuff that's tying this telegraph line into knots." With a brashly pointed look at Jackson's pistol, Red Hartwig sauntered away.

"Kinda overlook Miss Trudy's exasperations for a few days," old Tobac Williams muttered. "She's looking for an Army man to start hanging round here, and she wants everything to be running smooth as silk. This telegraph line is about the biggest thing in her life right now. She don't want that Union secret agent to get the wrong ideas about her being behind schedule and being from Alabama."

The old man's word sent a shivering wave of cold creeping across Teton Jackson's face. They knew that he was coming —not Teton Jackson exactly, but a Union Army man on secret mission! And what they knew, the gun ring could know and take to cover. In a jarring flash of recollection, Teton Jackson saw again that covert exchange of glances between Trudy Pearson and the old teamster when he looked at the Union flag. And he remembered too that despite her dislike she had given way when old Tobac insisted upon hiring him.

"Reckon a bluejacket would be easy to spot around here," Teton observed casually, furtively watching the old man's reactions. "A Union man would stand out like a bald-headed Sioux."

"Dickens says he's working under-the-brush like," the oldster spat. "And I reckon Fred Dickens has got his ways of knowing things. He gets that darned bad war news when nobody in the country even knows where the fightin's going on."

Teton Jackson's return nod was bleak. Dickens did seem to be sitting on news channels from somewhere. And his paper was definitely dangerous. But a man's sentiments weren't enough to hang him for in Finger Rock no matter which way he leaned. Too many men in Colorado were North or South, or fence riders waiting for something to push them one way or the other. And editor Fred Dickens was just doing a mighty lot of shoving toward his own hair brained scheme for a new nation in the west.

OLD Tobac took a crew back and they restrung wire through the burned-out place where Teton Jackson had helped them hold off the Sioux—and the two painted white men whom nobody made mention of aloud.

"Riding with us, bub?" the oldster called.

Teton shook his head. He had a little private looking around he wanted to tend to. Sioux Indians had made the raid on the wagons with new Spencer carbines in lower Colorado. And the Sioux didn't usually swing so far down from the Big Horn and Black Hills country—unless something had lured them down! Something important and precious like the promise of white-man's guns! Raiding the wagons they had used the guns.

"Don't reckon I'll go," he said casually.

Scrag Scurley laughed jeeringly, little pinpoints of hatred burning wickedly in his eyes. "She's tough going on a shovel," he taunted. "Lots tougher'n throwing pistols on fellers as ain't looking for it."

Teton Jackson stared across the quiet at the lean lines of Scrag Scurley's coarse face. The lineman met his eyes with a dark scowl of distrust and hatred, and Teton knew that here was an implacable enemy. The revelation jolted him strangely and warned him. Something unseen was goading the man's hatred and feeding its flames.

Trudy Pearson was standing before her tent again, the Army man saw. She watched Scrag Scurley baiting him, but she made no move to interfere. Then her eyes met his and she pointedly turned her attention toward the waiting wagon.

"I reckon I'll stay in camp," Scrag Scurley announced. "I reckon there's some hossback ridin' I'll be tending to when things get ready."

No man raised his voice in the quiet hollow made by Scrag Scurley's scalding hatred. It was plain that Teton Jackson was in a tight spot where he could either match guns with the burly lineman or tuck his tail in face of Scurley's openly voiced suspicions. Even Trudy Pearson was willing to see him hazed from camp. Only old Tobac Williams grinned encouragement.

The wire-stringers left, and Teton strolled slowly about the camp, closely dogged by Scrag Scurley. But open or sullen distrust hung like a sombre pall between him and the men. They wouldn't talk much, never laughed. At last the Union man saddled his black stallion and rode off into the hills.

SUN was a gory smear on top the western hill range when old Tobac finally led his wagon and crew back to camp. Teton and Scrag Scurley stood grooming marks of fast travel off their mounts. Both were wearing their guns, and a sparkling tension seemed fairly to crackle and snap between them.

"I can set poles," Teton said that evening. "I'll go ahead with the pole wagons tomorrow and we'll shove wire toward Finger Rock."

Tobac Williams snorted. "Hell's ablaze, bub. Any of us kin set poles. It's back behind where you're needed. Most Injuns is dead scared of this singing wire, but lately the varmints been clippin' it every night or so." The oldster dropped his voice so that it wouldn't reach the tent. "Might find out who's playing redskin."

An instant hush gripped the fireside. Men looked into the flames with set eyeballs or glanced covertly at their neighbors. And Teton saw that a good many of them were keeping him under constant surveillance.

"Why the hush-hush?" he challenged boldly. "If I'm drawin' your wages, I got a right to shoulder your problems."

Red Hartwig looked him over carefully while long seconds ticked off. Darkness lay lush and black over the hills. Somewhere far north a coyote wailed its chopping little barking.

"Trick was playing it square with Trudy," the redhead whispered finally. "He was organizing a crew to go south after this line reached Finger Rock. But somebody ambushed him afore we got there . . . like maybe they didn't want this line to go through. And Red Hartwig's watching his hindside plumb careful."

The redhead stopped talking, but Teton Jackson got the drift instantly. If one ambush killing didn't stop the line, more might follow. Might even be a wipe-out fight somewhere in the darkness ahead as a last resort to stop the wire. Small wonder none of the men wanted to saddle Trudy Pearson's shapely shoulders with that worry.

"Trick Pearson's crew?" Teton asked.

Red Hartwig shrugged. "Trick was the only man who knew them."

The grim silence forcefully reminded Teton that he was hired because of his gun-skill. Hunkered over a steaming cup of coffee, he learned how the telegraph line was string-halted by the wire being cut as fast as it was strung. And the Pearson Wire Company was slated for ruin—unless the wire reached Finger Rock within two weeks.

"Drop a fighting crew some ten miles behind," Teton advised boldly. "When the line goes dead they can ride hell-for-leather toward camp. They won't be expected and those raiders will be pinched between that fighting crew and this camp."

No enthusiasm was voiced. Men paid him scant heed, but Teton Jackson saw his plan take a solid hold upon the men. Heads slowly nodded agreement as they thought it over, and men rose to check guns and saddle leather. Presently Red Hartwig rose and sauntered over for a confab with Trudy Pearson. Then he came back with a key and phones.

"Oil them irons of yours," Tobac Williams crowed cheerfully. "We'll try a little scalp-gettin' of our own."

Teton looked up. "I'm not going," he said.

A dead quiet fell across the fire and gathered men in sullen knots who a moment before had been chuckling in anticipation of a good chance to even some grudges with the wire-cutters. Teton saw that he was alienating himself, driving a wedge between the telegraph crew and himself. But he had to do his riding alone.

"Maybe Mister Jackson is afraid," a feminine voice spoke scathingly from the shadows. "Leave him in camp, boys. I'll see that no one hurts him."

Trudy Pearson spoke with such contempt that old Tobac raised his head and stared sharply at her. Teton Jackson turned slowly. Trudy Pearson stepped into the glow of firelight, her eyes showing dark and luminous under the play of flames. She flushed under the old man's level gaze.

Teton Jackson looked away from the confused show of emotion that flustered her derision. He had to do his riding alone. There was a connection between the wire-cutting and the smuggling of guns to the Indians. But he couldn't tip his hand by taking anyone into his confidence. Instead he turned toward Red Hartwig, who stood watching the play between the Boss and the hard-faced gun-slung Teton Jackson.

"What do you use cement for?" he asked.

The green-eyed line foreman looked startled. "We don't use it," he said. "Ain't no cement in camp that Red Hartwig knows of."

The redhead whirled suddenly and Teton Jackson looked up. Scrag Scurley stood just at the edge of firelight, his coming unnoticed to all but the keen-eared redhead.

"Reckon we stiffen spines that start cavin' when they smell a little powder smoke," Scrag Scurley jeered. "I was ahind you when you rode along those wagon tracks this afternoon. And I spotted that cement powder too. But that wagon wasn't of this outfit."

Scurley turned quickly toward the watching oldtimer. "You remember, Tobac? You told this jasper the same thing. He's got the idea that one of our wagons vamoosed when those redskins hit us this morning. He's nosey as a Missouri hound dawg."

Tobac looked inquiringly at the stern-visaged Army man, and Teton saw that unrest was stirring the old man's frame.

"I've got my reasons," Teton said bluntly; but none were changed by his statement.

"Get your guns," he spat. "I'll ride with you."

IV

SCRAG SCURLEY laughed mirthlessly and said, "That's right, mister. You'll ride with us."

Red Hartwig picked six men to ride back through the night shadows. Scrag Scurley was one of them. But old Tobac cursed and yowled when told to remain in camp. At last he quieted down and organized his own little squad to race back down the line the instant the wire went dead.

Trudy Pearson stood beside Red Hartwig's horse. "Be careful, Red," she said. She looked significantly at Teton Jackson as she said it.

Teton Jackson looked down at her from the height of his big black stallion, probing the depths of her dislike. Something deep and as yet unfathomable was urging her on that way, making her hatred an ugly, living force where he was concerned. She met his stare, then her eyes softened somewhat and an unbidden light showed through for an instant. Jackson jerked his eyes away. Red Hartwig gave an order and they wheeled to ride from camp.

"I'm right at your elbow, mister," Scrag Scurley said evenly. "You wouldn't stand for this hoorawin' unless you had some reason for sticking with this outfit. I aim to find out just what that reason is before I let you alone."

Teton Jackson made no answer and the churn of hoofs stopped further talk. They rode fast and as quietly as possible, skirting the hills and pushing along the twisting valley bottoms working north and south but bearing ever east. Then finally they drew rein. Jackson peered at the stars overhead and silently judged it to be about three o'clock.

"We'll stick here for the rest of the night," Red Hartwig murmured. "They may make the cut between here and camp."

The men swung down, and Red Hartwig shinned up a pole and fastened his key. He slid back to the ground and bent over the sending key. A few deft jabs, an interval of silence. He hurled the key aside and jumped for his horse.

"Hell, men. She's dead already!"

As one man, the crew jumped for saddles and pounded back along the wire, cutting straight over hills and across gullies, following the dim line of telegraph poles.

Suddenly Teton Jackson jerked up his arm, but in the dim half-light only a few could see him or would pay any attention.

"Hey!" he yipped shrilly. "There's your wagon again!"

For an instant the black hulk of a wagon showed against the paler black of sky on a distant hill. Even as they veered toward it, a flicker of muzzle flame showed and lead sang eerily overhead.

Red Hartwig cursed vehemently and jerked out a sixgun. He slammed two quick shots toward the wagon.

"Easy, boss," Scrag Scurley growled. "You ain't close enough for that kind of gunplay."

They raced down into the black depths of a wide draw and found high rock-ribbed sides blocking their way. Red Hartwig cursed again and led off down the twisting defile at a thundering run. Caution rose in Teton's brain like a dawning sun, sending rays of doubt across his emotions. They were in a fair way to be fatally trapped if riflemen should lie in waiting on either bank of the draw. He started to point that out when a shattering volley of gunfire cut him off.

Fireflies danced and played along the dark draw rim. Lead snarled like deadly wasps through the night shadows. A horse went down in a floundering echo of sound, and a man yelled shrilly.

The Union man saw that they were trapped. Only the deep blackness of the draw bottom prevented a complete wipeout. Even as the realization swept him, his Dragoon pistol bucked in his hand.

"Flop, you men!" Scrag Scurley's battle wisdom roared. "Off your horses and into the shadows!"

Teton reined in and sat snapping shots at the faint flicker of rifle fire that edged the draw rim. But he couldn't see where his shots were going. The telegraph crew turned loose their own gun-thunder, and the narrow draw echoed and throbbed with criss-crossing gunfire. The night was surdenly rent with a high screaming agony of a suffering horse. Red Hartwig's voice shrilled curses through the blackness. Then the noise slowly ebbed, and both sides waited, shooting only when some movement in the dark gave them target.

Faintly through the tense blackness came the sound of a wagon making off at a hard run. Horses galloped through the night and Teton knew that his quarry was mak ing off. But men still hunkered along the protective rim of the draw and held the telegraph crew with savage rifle fire.

For long moments Teton sat his horse and waited, but no shot burned his way. The blackness protected him, he saw, kept the renegades from making out any distinct forms in the deep below-ground blackness. And with that reasoning he began easing the black stallion backwards. Seconds ticked off while tension pulled the muscles tight across his shoulders and up behind his neck. The shooting fell slowly behind. Then the draw veered and a high bank cut across vision of the muzzle flames. He wheeled the stallion.

"Jackson!" a hoarse voice bawled out suddenly up the draw. "Where are you, you gun-totin' terror? They gut-shoot you or your spine turned soft?"

Teton recognized the hoarse tones of Scrag Scurley. He reined against the far wall of the draw and urged his mount against the steep bank. They moved down the defile, the mount fighting his insistent rein. Then the stallion started lunging up the slope and he was out of the draw.

A fierce rattle of gunfire began slamming sound hard across the hills again. Teton circled, giving that battle a wide girth. The night would protect Trudy Pearson's loyal crew members from any but lucky chance shots. Teton Jackson's guns wouldn't be needed. But the Union cause did need him, desperately. He urged his black cayuse into a lope and split the breeze in the general direction the wagon had taken. Gradually his eyes focussed to the night's lack of light and he saw the broken passage the fleeing wagon had made through the brush.

AS the sounds of gunfire fell behind, new sounds came riding the faint evening breeze. Reining in swiftly, Teton Jackson recognized the strum of pounding hoofs somewhere just ahead. He shot forward quickly, urging his stallion to the uttermost. Then the skyline ahead showed movement and he saw the dim outline of a racing wagon. At the same time lead slammed his hat back against the chinstrap.

Teton wheeled and angled toward the west, slamming a quick brace of slugs toward the muzzle flare. A man yipped, and the Army man smiled grimly. An excited voice started shrilling commands as he circled the ambuscade and started for the fleeing wagon again. Then a pounding mass

of horses shot out of the darkness and made directly for him.

A glint of white showed in the darkness and Teton slammed a burning blob of lead toward it. The shot drew instant fire from the raiders charging toward him. A stab of fire touched his neck. The doeskin jacket jerked tight against his lean side with the passage of a heavy-caliber bullet.

Outnumbered, Teton hunkered low over his sweating black and gave it loose rein. The stallion tore straight out into the hills. behind came the shooting pack of night-riders, ripping the blackness wide with gun blasts and the stinking whine of hot lead. Teton cut down a sharp decline, whirled to place the shoulder of a hill between the pursuers and his own person. Then he jackrabbited into another side valley and rode desperately southward.

Gradually the realization came that he had lost the murderous pack. With a sigh of relief the Union man pulled the laboring black in and sat testing the night for alien sound. There was only silence. Not even the yap of coyotes chopped the night. And the gunbattle in the draw was either over or out of range of hearing. Slack-muscled after the prolonged tension, Teton Jackson slowly reloaded his guns and breathed the stallion. That tended to, he began a careful back-track toward where he had left Trudy Pearson's battling telegraph crew. And as he rode he mused over the strange wagon and the gun crew that rode protecting it.

Dawn lay like a pearl ribbon in the far east before he cut sign of horse tracks. Following them a short distance, Teton realized that they were those made by Red Hartwig and his men in riding out from the main telegraph camp. In riding after the wire cutters they had sped in a straight breakneck line along the wire. Teton rode to a high hill and scanned the rolling brown country. Copper wire made a faint shine some little distance away and he made for it, cut tracks again and followed them to the draw. Fifteen minutes later he came upon signs of the night's gunfight.

"Don't ride any more until you do some tall talking," a cold voice suddenly clipped from the brush to his right. Then another cut in sharply: "Hell, it's that Teton Jackson!"

Teton Jackson sat his mount with little riffles of tension pulling at his nerves. He caught the muffled exclamations that followed mention of his name. Then Scrag Scurley slid down the bank in a shower of flying dust and clods. He stomped over and stood looking up at the Union Army man.

"Come in, Jackson," Scrag Scurley taunted grimly. "We'd like to learn how you got out of that pinch last night."

"That's pretty plain, isn't it?" Trudy Pearson's low voice put in. "He has a knack for not getting himself hurt."

The hatred made a rough rasping note in her tones as she threw her feelings at the surprised man on the black mount. Again he caught himself wondering just what lay behind her vehemence. Then other crew members began to appear from the brush, and horses were led into the draw farther on down. All eyed Teton hostilely, even old Tobac Williams whose eyes gleamed frostily against the leathery texture of his methodically working jaws.

"I went after that wagon," Teton Jackson heard himself explaining with an anxiety that wasn't quite natural. "I knew that you could hold them back as long as it remained dark. I backed down the draw and cut around to see about that wagon."

"And just what did you see, Red Hartwig would like to know?" Red Hartwig cut in softly.

Teton Jackson spread his hands. "I couldn't get close to it," he admitted. "I ran into a gun-crew and had to cut for leather." Then Jackson remembered the white he had nearly run down, the gleam of white in the brush that he had shot into. "But I think I got a jasper wearing a white shirt."

Scrag Scurley raised a hooting laugh of derision. "You think you got one," he jeered. "Hell, mister, look what we ketched."

He jerked a thumb toward the upper draw, and Teton saw four bound men herded toward him by two of the telegraph crew who fondled ready rifles.

"Friends of yours?" Scrag Scurley snapped.

Teton Jackson jerked under the impact of the man's accusations. The stunning words made many things clear, the hostile attitude of the men, Tobac Williams' unfriendly silence. And that would explain why he was always under some of the crew

men's rifles whenever he chanced to twist or fidget in the saddle.

"Friends of yours?" Scrag Scurley repeated harshly.

Teton Jackson eyed him while the sensation of hopeless desperation gouged at his nerves. "No. Why?" he asked, his gaze roving from stern visage to stern visage, pausing only briefly on the cold mask of feminine dislike that Trudy Pearson was using to hide a hurt. Scrag Scurley's tones jerked Teton Jackson's attention away from the enigma he was finding this woman.

"Because Tobac Williams and his bunch came up behind them while they was perched on the draw rim warming rifles at us," Scrag Scurley snarled. "We found a newspaper in their saddle bags!"

Red Hartwig thrust the paper into Jackson's hands. It was a copy of Dickens' radical sheet. And penciled on the margin was—"Make delivery to Teton Jackson at once!"

V

TETON JACKSON felt his face grow numb and set as the crewman's words cut into him. He raised both hands shoulder high when the riflemen moved their arms and openly covered him. Trudy Pearson turned away, her head held disdainfully high.

"Get him to leave, Red," she said coldly. "But don't kill him unless it's necessary. I'll ride ahead into camp. We've got to make up time stringing line now."

Scrag Scurley growled angrily in his thick throat as the woman ordered Teton Jackson not to be killed. Then a gleam of red showed fleetingly in his narrowed eyes, and Teton had the uncomfortable feeling that his death might be necessary unless he walked light and easy. Nor did the cool green pools that were Red Hartwig's orbs give him any room for hope.

For a long moment the Army man debated making his real mission known. Every hour he hesitated gave the wagon that much more headstart. And yet he had no assurance that he would live to leave the draw even if he did admit his identity. Scrag Scurley was from Missouri; Trick Pearson had been organizing a band to ride south against the Union. Even Trudy Pearson, with her soft drawl, was hard to figure out. She professed to favor the Union, but so would the gun-ring undoubtedly.

"Look, men," Teton said suddenly. "That wagon I chased may be delivering guns to the Indians. If you'll ride with me, we can trail it through the brushy country and see where it is headed." They didn't stir and he added passionately: "It's to your advantage more than to mine to keep the Indians from running wild. And they will run wild as long as they can get guns that are superior to those we use!"

That stirred them. Several voices broke in at once. Red Hartwig looked to old Tobac Williams for opinion. They all were grimly aware of what arming the redskins would mean to the outposts of Colorado.

"And what do you get out of it?" Red Hartwig asked bluntly. "Red Hartwig can't spot any stake of yours that's in danger—or can he?"

Trudy Pearson came at the men suddenly. "It's a trap!" she shrilled. "He just wants to lead you away from the telegraph. You can't desert now to go running after a rainbow's end. We've got to string that wire into Finger Rock."

Scrag Scurley strode forward with a rolling thrust to his shoulders, his face set and ugly with dire intent. Teton Jackson felt himself trapped by his own fatal words about the gun-ring.

"She's right, men," Scrag Scurley bawled. "I say we—"

"She's wrong!" Teton Jackson exclaimed savagely. "Why do you think you're behind schedule? That wire into Finger Rock will give this country a true picture of things back east. Secession and Copperhead men can't stand for the public to know how the war is going. Too many out here aren't interested; they'd swing to the winning side for the convenience of it."

Tobac Williams nodded his grizzly old head and scratched a thumbnail raspingly through his jaw stubble. Red Hartwig's long face turned pale until the mirthless grin stood out like an ax gash. A rifle clicked back to full cock, the metallic sound sharp in the stillness.

"That Dickens has got some jaspers believing his Independent West hocum," Teton charged hurriedly, desperately aware of the shifting ground under his feet. At

any moment that cocked rifle might bellow out. "The wire would hurt them too. They thrive on the lies and fakery Dickens dishes out in that paper, telling folks how badly they are being treated and how neither the North or the South are making any effort to help."

"That's straight talk," Tobac Williams said. "But where's it point?"

"What'll happen to your telegraph line if the Indians get modern rifles out of that wagon?" Teton blazed. "What'll happen to every little mining camp and lone prospector? Why, this country will run with blood. The Union can't spare troops to keep the Indians in order. There won't be any law and order—just armed gangs protecting themselves and staying close to home. Outlaws would have pickings!"

"And the Union would lose the west with its men and horses and gold," Scrag Scurley snarled. "Is that your worry?"

Affirmative reply lay ready on Teton Jackson's tongue but he didn't answer. He'd made his plea. Now he could only wait and see how the telegraph crew lined themselves.

BUT mention of marauding renegades and Indians with modern arms dug into the men, pierced deeper than their distrust.

"Reckon we got a taste o' that yesterday morning," old Tobac grunted.

Mention of the fracas in which two of the crew had been killed and another badly injured swayed them. A man ran back up the draw and came back with the horses. Trudy Pearson stood vehemently condemning the man on the black stallion as a traitor to his country. She pleaded for the men to ignore his wild ranting and stick with the telegraph wire.

"You tried to kill Fred Dickens in camp yesterday," she charged Teton Jackson. "Now you're using any excuse you can think of to turn these men into pawns to do your killings for you. But I won't have it! I won't believe that of my friends! I won't!"

"Unless he's connected with that wagon he won't be implicated," Teton Jackson said gently. "His paper is a pack of lies front and back, but he won't be killed for that. All I want is to see who was driving that wagon and where it went."

Tobac Williams nodded brusquely. "Do it," he said. "I'll ride along. And if it's a trap, this old Sharps'll blow you to kingdom come first smell of powder."

"And Red Hartwig'll be burning powder on the other side of you," the redhead clipped ominously. "You take too much interest in those Indians and their guns for just a wanderin' jasper like you let on to be."

Despite Trudy Pearson's protests, they rode the hill country looking for the wagon's tracks through the low buckbrush and sage. Trudy Pearson rode disconsolately campward with half the crew who would continue stringing copper wire toward Finger Rock. The rest, including Scrag Scurley, rode surrounding Teton Jackson and combed the hills. They followed the trail of broken, wheel-mashed verdure, but the wagon turned to barren ground and the trail was lost.

"So you shot a man in a white shirt," Scrag Scurley taunted. "Sure it wasn't this?"

He thrust a white object in Teton's face, and the Army man saw a copy of Dickens' paper waved under his nose. A black-edged hole testified to his marksmanship. He took the paper, the same ranting denunciations of the Union and talk of a free and independent west, the same gruesome lists of Indian depredations. One detail was underscored: mention of a cowboy being shot down ten yards inside Randy's Pass. When Teton tossed the paper aside he saw that the tips of his fingers were faintly powdered with white. He tasted the powder.

"Where's Randy's Pass?" Teton asked Tobac Williams, spitting to free his tongue from the taste of cement.

"North," Red Hartwig cut in. "But Red Hartwig's got some .45 slugs that say you're not going there. You're headed back to camp with us. This wild-goose chase has cost us enough time." The redhead looked the Union man in the eye. "And you better figure who was to deliver what to Teton Jackson like that paper had writ on it!"

Teton started to protest that he knew nothing of the little note written on that paper found in the saddlebag of the ambush gunman, but a rough gouge from a rifle muzzle silenced him. Fuming against the secrecy that forbade his making him-

self known, he rode the long silent trip back to camp under the telegraph crew's rifles. But a word about his true identity might bring a sudden shattering volley of rifle fire. He had that to wonder about too.

Then as the crew hurried to shove the telegraph line forward, he sat and waited under the watchful guard of two crew members who were not going out to the head of the line. And their ready rifles made it plain that neither was he.

"Trudy ain't here," old Tobac Williams pointed out. "When she comes back from Finger Rock we'll figure out what to do with you." His tones indicated the fatal consequences of any untoward move on Jackson's part.

Then they were gone and only Teton Jackson, the four trussed captives, and the two guards remained at camp. Everyone else was out pushing telegraph wire toward Finger Rock and keeping a vigilant eye on the surrounding hill crests.

"Who lives at Randy's Pass?" Teton asked the whiskered man guarding him.

"Nobody," the crewman grunted sullenly. "And talk with your wire-cutting friends over there. I ain't having any truck with a jasper who'd doublecross a girl like Trudy Pearson and try to kill off her crew in a gun trap like you shoved us into last night."

It was plain that protests would be wasted. Teton Jackson sauntered over and looked down at the four men tied hand and foot and laid in the shade of a wagon. The pistol holster flopped empty and impotent against his thigh. Without that Dragoon pistol he was helpless, his reputation as a dangerous gunfighter an empty threat. But if—

"Want a drink of water?" Teton asked the captives.

They nodded and he went for water, closely followed by one of the telegraph crew guards. Teton walked slowly around the cook tent. When the guard followed Teton was ready.

HE rammed the end of his closed pocket knife brutally into the guard's corded belly, making up in violence what he had not in intent.

"Drop that rifle!" Teton whispered hoarsely. "And no noise or this derringer will eat two tunnels through your guts it'd take a good-sized barrel of sand to fill."

The man blanched and staggered back. Teton stepped in close and jerked the rifle from the man's undecided hands.

"Call Hank over here," Teton ordered, gesturing with the rifle. "And be mighty careful how you do it."

The man called his fellow guard. Then as Hank stepped around back of the cook shack he too was confronted by a stony-eyed Teton Jackson and a hard thrust of gun muzzle rammed inches deep into his belly.

"That's right! Drop it!" Teton clipped.

Appropriating their belt guns, Teton herded the two guards inside the cook tent and roped them securely. Then he cut loose the four men taken by Tobac Williams' surprise rear attack at the draw.

"Give me a cutter," one of them grinned ruthlessly.

"Take me to Randy's Pass," Teton Jackson ordered, "and I'll turn you free."

The man looked startled. "What you know about Randy's Pass?" he growled suspiciously.

Teton grinned. "It was in the paper, wasn't it? I want to cut in with you fellows on a good thing," he said. "If I didn't, I wouldn't have freed you, would I?"

"Righto," they agreed finally. "The Boss will want to thank you anyway for what you did. Reckon he could use a smart jasper like you. Ain't everybody who could figure out the gun caches just by readin' a newspaper." One of the men smirked wolfishly. "I'm spillin' this information just to show you that we trust you. Now do the same for us—with a cutter."

Teton Jackson hesitated momentarily, but to refuse would be to invite the suspicions of the four. Now that he was on the right trail and with the four trusting him enough to talk like they were, he had to allay their suspicions at all costs. Reluctantly he handed the men the guards' two rifles and one of the sixguns. They found horses and rode hard and fast toward the north and east, finally veering in a circle toward the south.

"Randy's Pass is north," Teton Jackson said suddenly. "How come we're pointed south?" His hand hovered close to the pistol at his thigh as he waited their answer.

"You want to find that wagon, don't you?" a skinny renegade said. "Well

Randy's Pass is old stuff. That's why it was in the paper. The wagon is down this way now."

Half satisfied, Teton Jackson followed their lead into hills that grew sharper and rougher until it seemed impossible for a wagon to have made such a trip.

"There it is," one of the outlaws said, pointing his arm.

Teton saw the wagon in a narrow valley, hidden from all sides by a copse of wild plum trees. His fingers twitched with expectancy, but he curbed his impatience and followed down the almost sheer side of a huge rocky hill. Two bedrolls were under the wagon and ashes of a small fire off to one side. But there was no sign of men or horses.

Jackson spurred ahead toward the wagon. And as he did so a tall ranny came from behind the plum thicket, one arm in a sling. Teton saw with a jolt of recognition that it was one of the gunnies he had shot up in his fight with Dickens at the telegraph camp.

"Hell, it's Jackson!" the outlaw yelled, clawing for his pistol with an awkward left hand.

"Why you think these two rifles are centered on his spine?" a renegade clipped harshly from Teton's rear. "We know who he is. The Boss wrote us a little note marking this jay-bird. We was supposed to make the delivery of hot lead, but I reckon the Boss will want to do it himself seein' as how we got this Union spy with us here."

Teton Jackson saw the grim portent of the note penciled on the newspaper the renegades were carrying. Desperately he started his move. At the same split-second a heavy blow crushed his hat crown down against his skull, and his eyes grew filmed with a dark haze of blood-red sparks. The snarling outlaw swung his rifle again and Teton slipped limply from the saddle, his head oozing red.

VI

THE sun was angling westward when Teton finally became conscious of the tumultuous pounding within his skull. He groaned and tried to sit up. Then his eyes flicked open to a painful glare of daylight. He could move neither hand nor foot and was jolting along in a wagon. The outlaw he had winged was driving. The renegade looked back as a sudden lurch of the wagon brought a gasp of pain from Teton's tightly clamped lips. The driver leered and whipped his team to a faster, rougher pace.

"Enjoy this ride, Yankee," the driver taunted. "It'll be your last. Old Chief Turkey-Leg and his Cheyennes are coming in after rifles tonight. And you'll be there like a Christmas turkey. That's for what you did to two of the boys playing Indian!"

Teton closed his eyes and fought back waves of faintness. His body ached, numbness creeping upward from his bound legs. The picture painted by the driver brought a shiver to his spine. He well knew the tortures a white man would receive from Turkey-Leg. And if that white man was a special enemy as Teton Jackson would be branded—he clamped his jaws and lurched in an effort to turn over. Half turned, he felt his legs gripped in an immovable vise of weight and he reared up.

The sight brought a new sickness to his tortured hopes. Both legs disappeared just below the knees in a great blob of hardened cement. Nearly as large as a washtub, the cement was a trap that would hold him helpless wherever the driver chose to dump him.

"Pretty, ain't it?" the driver laughed jeeringly. "Reckon you got too interested in cement, so the boss fixed you up like he fixes up the rifles for the redskins. Seals them rifles up in a crack between two boulders and sprinkles rock dust on the drying cement crust. Hell, you can't tell there's any crack there, and it'll break like an egg shell. Only your little cement seal won't bust so easy. And we ain't put any write-up in the paper telling just where to look for you."

The renegade wagon driver's taunts were like peals of doom to Teton Jackson as he heard the things he was never to live to repeat. Small wonder the rifle caches were never found. The outlaws sealed them in fissures in rock, and between boulders, sprinkling rock dust on the drying cement so that all traces of the cache were erased. Then when delivery was intended, Dickens wrote up a list of Indian butcheries and the last story told where the cached rifles could be found—like the story about the

cowboy being shot down at Randy's Pass, ten yards in.

The driver laughed at Teton Jackson's writhing helplessness and talked on, gibing at the Union man who lay with his feet encased in hundreds of pounds of concrete.

"The paper is coming out telling us where the guns are cached for Turkey-Leg," the outlaw hooted. "We'll lead the Indians to that place and crack the thin rock-dust and cement shell that hides them. Smart, ain't it? The gents bringing the guns in from the States never see us; we don't see them. That way we can't tell who's bringing them in; they can't tell who's peddling them."

The Union man cursed, but the driver only laughed and whipped up his team. And while the Indians fondled their new Spencer rifles and plotted further butchery of frontier women and children they would have a Union Army agent to torment and torture, Teton knew.

The wagon lurched across a badger hole, and the Army man bit his lips against the pain as the great cement blob skittered, dragging his body behind it. The driver looked over his shoulder upon hearing the commotion. He saw what was happening and a brutal grin warped his face. Then he jerked the reins and sent the wagon sliding along a hillside. Again the great cement blob shifted, and Teton Jackson twisted to keep his legs from being snapped like match sticks.

They raced across the rough hill country, the driver warping his wagon to move the cement, Teton Jackson writhing and twisting to keep his legs from being broken. And then he saw something that had eluded the vigilance of the driver and a faint ray of hope began to dawn.

The long picket line of telegraph poles appeared before them. Teton Jackson braced his shoulders and silently prayed.

"We'll snip this tonight too," the outlaw grated as they drove under the wire. "Old Turkey-Leg will get the blame and that Pearson woman won't get her wire into Finger Rock. People will follow the telegraph line, and we don't want people rushing in here, crying for troops to protect them and for law and order to look after them. And I reckon we'll stop that."

The sneering certainty in the man's voice struck sparks from the iron core of the Union man's makeup. Teton reared up and snapped, "This country is going to become civilized in spite of you. You can run it red with the blood of innocent people by supplying guns to the Indians, but when the smoke clears away the people will be here and your kind won't."

The driver jeered and swerved his team to torture the Union champion. It was the move Teton Jackson had been waiting for and praying that wouldn't come until he was ready. He now had no choice. The cement blob rolled off the back of the wagon, snapping his body after it and nearly wrenching his legs from his body as it hit hard and half turned over. The outlaw yelled as he sawed his team about and came racing back.

"I guess the wolves will finish you instead of the Indians," he said after futilely tugging at the cement. "Three men couldn't lift you back in the wagon now." The outlaw looked at the barren hills and the night already beginning to throw a haze. "You won't be running off anyhow," he observed callously. "And by morning you'll be warm in some wolf's guts."

The renegade started to turn away, and Teton Jackson saw the end of the rope staring him grimly in the face. He saw doomed beyond hope. And what he knew of the outlaw gun-ring would die with him, helplesslessly pinned to the immovable cement.

VII

AS the wagon began moving away, a chill swept through Teton Jackson's frame, like a breaking dam releasing pent-up torrents of utter hopelessness. He had saved himself from Turkey-Leg and his bloodthirsty Cheyenne braves but only to give himself over to the tearing fangs of some skulking prairie wolf. Traitorous Fred Dickens would continue his gun peddling. Possibly even Trudy Pearson would be grateful and marry. . . .

A protest of fury grated shrilly through his clinched teeth. The receding wagon stopped.

"You say something, spy?" the driver yelled. "Or was you just practicing for when the wolves start nibbling at your face?"

"Come back here!" Teton Jackson cried.

"Shoot me now. Or cut these ropes and give me a gun and I'll do it." He rolled his eyes and stared his anguish at the jeering outlaw. "Give me a whiteman's death," he pleaded.

The outlaw guffawed. Then he sobered and stared at the jeopardized Union agent for long moments while his suspicions grew plain and evil across his coarse face. Suddenly he grinned.

"You can do it yourself while I watch," he grated. "I'll cut the ropes and toss you an empty gun. I'll throw the ca'tridges nearby but don't you make a move till I get out of range or I'll gut-shoot you and leave you lay." The outlaw made good his word by cutting the ropes that bound Teton Jackson's arms. "Take a shot at me," the renegade warned ,"and you'll wish you'd died quiet under the wolves." Then he tossed Jackson's own pistol into the wiry brown grass beside the trapped Army man whose numbed arms still refused to move for him.

The outlaw whipped up his team and pulled out of pistol range, there to sit and build a smoke. The prickling agonies of Teton's arms gave way slowly to stealing life, and he moved his fingers and flexed his forearms. Then he picked up the heavy six-gun and loaded it. The outlaw was watching him keenly. Teton felt a barbed impulse to snap a shot at the smirking renegade, but he knew that the load would never reach the man. And his own death would be awful to contemplate as the outlaw had only tossed down two pistol loads.

"It's your choice, Jackson," the outlaw urged. "Make your play so that nobody will get blamed for killing you. Or lay quiet and see how well two loads will keep a pack of hungry wolves back when it's night and a man can't move to get away from them.

Teton lanced a venomous glance at the outlaw. But the man was right. The Union Army agent lifted the cold pistol muzzle against his head and pulled the trigger. A jagged smashing blow ripped across his skull just above his right ear. He saw billowing waves of mist and blackness envelope him. Then the stiff grass poked him in the face and his jaws were hot with spilling blood.

After a long interval during which Teton Jackson lay fighting back the sweeping waves of unconsciousness that threatened to overpower him, the renegade driver reined his wagon in close and sat eyeing the bloody head of the Union Army man. Teton lay without breathing, peering through the haze of his eyelashes at the outlaw. But the cagey outlaw wasn't to be so easily fooled. Finally he got down from the wagon and walked over and gave Teton a brutal kick in the ribs.

Like a flash Teton whipped the six-gun up and sent his last shot burning through the renegade's heart. The outlaw staggered back a step. Teton Jackson reached out and grabbed his boot, held the outlaw's foot while the man sprawled and died. Then the Union man dragged the outlaw's body toward himself.

Securing the renegade's beltgun and ammunition, Teton Jackson lay back and rested. Gradually the pulsating pounding within his bullet-torn head steadied. He raised his pistol and aimed along the barrel. Each throb of his heart sent the barrel wobbling. He lowered the gun and waited, casting anxious glances at the sun which was completely out of sight beyond the western hills. The one long chance he had for survival was fast slipping from him. He raised the pistol and tried aiming it again. Still it wobbled, but he had to take the chance while there was yet light to see.

It was his only hope.

Twisting his body around so that he could rest the gun on the immovable block of cement, Teton Jackson aimed carefully and fired. A chip of glass flew from one of the telegraph line insulators. Biting his lip, Teton eared back the hammer and tried again—and again—until his ammunition supply was dwindling. Then with a humming spang, he hit the wire square and clipped it.

With a sigh of satisfaction, Teton Jackson fell back upon the parched grass and stared up at the colorless sky. He had made his play. If the telegraph crew found him before the wolves got to him, or before the renegades came looking for the wagon and the now dead driver, he might yet get his messages sent back to the General. But if the broken line wasn't discovered until—Teton shuddered and looked at his meager stock of cartridges. At least he could go down fighting.

THE slow warmth of seeping blood began oozing down his face again. The earth felt soft and good to his wearied, aching body. He closed his eyes for a moment—then opened them, staring. After a moment the lids drooped.

A cold voice snapped him awake so rapidly that his senses reeled. "Toss those pistols away, Jackson! And put your hands against that cement-hobble where I can see them both! Move! Red Hartwig ain't aimin' to wait overlong."

Jackson stared into the colored-glass eyes of Red Hartwig who sat his pony and pointed a heavy six-gun at the Union man's bloody head. Teton Jackson started to say something, but the icy fury of Hartwig's features stopped him. Slowly he tossed the pistols and the dead outlaw's gunbelt beyond the circle of his reach. Red Hartwig looked curiously at the dead renegade.

"Looks like you met some friends," Red Hartwig said. "But I'll say you're a fighter. Even when left for wolves or Indians to find, you do your job and cut the telegraph line. Too bad you couldn't be fightin' on the other side."

Wondering just what the other side really was, Teton said, "Look, Red. There's a lot you don't understand. I'm for the telegraph. I want it to reach Finger Rock."

Red Hartwig snorted. "So you pull out of camp and take those murdering renegades with you! You ride into a gun-trap with us and pull out without getting scratched! You're damned right there is a lot I don't understand." Then the redhead's tones modulated suspiciously. "That's what I was doing out here in the hills and how come I heard your shooting. I kinda want to know who's toting cement around this country in a wagon and why? And I want to find out how come Fred Dickens had your name on one of his newspapers in his own handwriting—and after you winged two of his pet gunnies?"

Teton Jackson saw that the redhead wasn't convinced of anything, that he was trying to get at the bottom of things before making a hard and fast decision. But where did the green-eyed redhead stand? Jackson saw that he would jeopardize everything if he revealed his true identity to the redhead and then have Hartwig turn out a member of the gun-ring—or radically South.

"Where's old Tobac?" Teton stalled while he tried to find a tale to tell the redhead without making his own Union sympathies too openly apparent.

Red Hartwig's face grew set. "He came into camp half shot in two," the redhead snarled. "Claimed he ran onto some of your friends sealing rifles in a cache under some rocks. Trudy drove him into Finger Rock in the buckboard, and him a-ravin' about new rifles bein' parcelled out to the Indians. And he was riding your black stallion!"

Red Hartwig's narrowed green eyes burned into Teton Jackson's with a fury that was too intense to be feigned. "If that's your game, feller, you can't hang too soon to suit me."

Teton Jackson gasped: "Trudy in Finger Rock—with Tobac!" His mind pictured the bloody demise of that valiant old plains fighter. And the traitorous newspaper editor would gloat over the oldtimer's death even while he put on a long face and held Trudy's unsuspecting hand.

"Red!" Teton Jackson suddenly decided. "I'm that Union agent Dickens told Miss Trudy to expect. You can find my papers under the butt plate on my Henry rifle." Then Teton groaned dismally. "But my horse is with those renegades and the rifle is in the saddle sheath."

Red Hartwig stared at the trapped Jackson. "If you're running a sandy," he said. "It's a blazer. But I told you Tobac brought your stallion in to camp. He was worming up on those renegades when they spotted him. He made a run for the nearest horse, which happened to be your black."

"And was my Henry rifle there?" Teton shouted, a new blaze of hope surging vital strength through his jaded being. "Was the rifle still in the sheath?"

"I reckon," Red Hartwig said. He stared quizzically at the bloody figure who claimed to be a Union Army agent. "I can't take you in with that cement on your boots. And I can't peel it off with my finger nails." Hartwig dismounted suddenly and kicked the two six-guns back toward Teton Jackson. "If you're telling it straight I'll bring a crew back and chip you free. If you're stretching a tall one, I'll come back tomorrow night—or later."

The receding pound of hooves died out,

and Teton Jackson tried to make himself comfortable. A ravenous thirst choked his throat. Every muscle in his long body ached as though he had fallen underfoot during a cavalry charge. But he grinned up at the darkening sky. Only when he wondered whether or not the outlaws had removed his Henry rifle did the grin fade. It was a modern rifle, unusual this far west, and any of the renegades might have taken it.

THE darkness came down and closed him in. Overhead the stars sprinkled the blackness with pinpoints of light. A coyote began yipping far to the north. Then Teton heard the heavier, deeper challenge of a wolf. He pulled both six-guns free and lay quietly waiting. The odor of his blood was filling the night, he knew. And he would live only so long as his gunfire held any attackers at bay.

Midnight came and went, and still Red Hartwig did not appear. Teton swallowed stiffly and jerked the buttons from his shirt and sucked them in a vain endeavor to work a little saliva into his parched throat. His hopes drained lower and lower. The Henry rifle was probably gone and Red Hartwig waiting until next night before returning, waiting for the wilds to finish the helplessly trapped man he thought renegade.

Then another dire thought struck the jaded Union agent with jolting force. Maybe the rifle was there. Maybe Red Hartwig had found and burned the papers. The telegraph crew might be loyal men of the Deep South every one. They wouldn't go much out of their way to help a Union agent.

The yapping dirge of coyote wails suddenly hushed as though blanketed. Teton Jackson stirred and peered about. Some alien or more fierce thing had frightened the coyotes into silence. The pistols were heavy and hard in his hands as he tried vainly to pierce the darkness about him.

A whipping pound of hooves reached him. Savage or white men? Then Red Hartwig's voice rang gustily through the night.

"You still there, Teton?" Hartwig laughed. "We found that Henry rifle, and I reckon we know who you are now."

The rider dismounted and came forward to press a canteen and a bundle of sandwiches into Teton Jackson's eager hands. After a time the wagon came and men leaped out to press Jackson's hand and try embarrassed explanations of doubts and distrusts. Even Scrag Scurley came forward.

"Reckon you and me'll be meeting over rifle barrels afore the war is over," Scurley said bluntly. "But for now I'm siding with you in helpin' Miss Trudy." He held out a hard hand. "Reckon Trick'd do the same thing if'n he was here."

Teton nodded, but found that he couldn't say much to the surly gunfighter. The bigness of the man was coming through in that he was shaking hands with a potential enemy for sake of a dead friend's sister.

They began the gingerly dangerous task of chipping the huge cement blob from Teton Jackson's imprisoned legs.

"Trudy is staying in Finger Rock," Red Hartwig clipped. "Fred Dickens is dickering for the line. And I reckon he'll get it if Tobac Williams dies. Trudy is about done with bucking this country. And she thinks Fred Dickens is a good man, just a little misled."

That news goaded Teton Jackson's impatience almost beyond endurance. He grabbed a maul and began chiseling at the cement with reckless, driving strength.

"Easy, man," Red Hartwig cautioned. "If that chisel slips it'll be good-bye leg."

But Teton swung furiously and the cement chips scattered. Then as the cement blob dwindled and the sharp chisels drew closer to Jackson's legs their progress slowed. Finally they were tapping gingerly lest they break through and cut into the furiously ranting Union Agent's flesh.

"Swing, buckos," he cursed. "Get this damned weight off my legs. Old Turkey-Leg is leading a war party through these hills looking for his rifles and they won't be there. He'll be prime for blood and pizen mean."

Then the long chore was done. Teton Jackson lay on the grass and stared at the ruined tatters of his boots. Thank God he had changed from moccasins when he started working in the brush with the wire crew! Two of the men helped him to his feet and supported him as he hobbled about driving life back into his legs. Red Hartwig led the black stallion forward.

"Get your fighting crew and head for Finger Rock," Teton Jackson said. "I'll cut through and rouse the town where I can. And, Scrag: Fred Dickens can tell you something about who ambushed Trick Pearson. It was his gunnies riding with those Sioux."

The burly gunman whirled with a squawk. "Why'nt you say so before?" he raged, legging it for his horse.

" 'Cause he's my meat!" Teton yelled. "I don't want to let you get to him first!"

He spurred off into the night before Scrag Scurley had time to answer. A few men jumped their horses and shot out after him at a dead run. But the black stallion was fresh from having been riderless on the long trip from camp. Teton Jackson's lead lengthened out until finally he was riding the night alone, ripping through the hills with a reckless abandon that gave little heed to Turkey-Leg and his Cheyennes or any other force that dared contest his way.

The sun came up and threw a long shadow in front of the laboring stallion when finally Teton Jackson topped a rise and saw below the mining town of Finger Rock.

A FEW citizens stared curiously as he tore down the wide street in a flurry of dust and jerked in before Fred Dickens' newspaper office. Dickens and Trudy Pearson stepped out of the little cafe across the street and stared at him. Dickens yelled amazement and fury, jerking out a gun.

"Get that Union spy!" Dickens bellowed.

Teton saw the way Trudy Pearson's eyes widened as she whirled to stare at the bellowing editor. Then a gun blared from down the street, streaking lead across the bridge of Jackson's nose so close that it made his eyes water. He plummeted from the saddle and lit flat in the road dust. A salvo of lead scorched the air above his saddle where he had been sitting a split second before.

Legging it swiftly, Teton Jackson charged toward the newspaper office and took cover in the doorway. Fred Dickens snaked out a long arm and coiled it across Trudy Pearson's chest, dragging her struggling body tight against his own as a flesh and blood shield. She struggled fiercely but her strength was no match for the raging editor's. Dickens poked his pistol toward the waiting Union agent. Trudy Pearson struggled the harder and the shot went wild. Then Dickens began backing back toward the little cafe. His fumbling boot reached the plank walk and he dragged Trudy Pearson up on the walk after him.

A bearded renegade stepped out of the saloon down the street for a clear look. Teton Jackson whipped his pistol around and dropped hammer. The outlaw stopped dead in his tracks. Then he wheeled slowly and fell full length.

Trudy Pearson was still fighting the editor, and while Teton watched, Dickens hurled the woman from him and leaped inside the cafe. Splinters tore into Teton's cheek as he peered around the newspaper office doorway. A solid slam of lead made its black hole directly before his eyes, and he saw that he was an open target for Fred Dickens in the cafe across the street. He ripped a brace of scorchers at the cafe and jumped into the building behind him. Glass clattered down to the board walk outside, and a type case lurched and spewed type.

A quick glance up and down the street showed Teton Jackson that half a dozen guns were throwing lead at the newspaper office. But the street in front was empty. There was no sign of Trudy Pearson. Editor Dickens must have darted out of the cafe, grabbed her, and dragged her inside the building with him. Snarling with rage, Jackson lanced a quick shot at a saloon window and heard the sloppy plunk of a gut-shot even before he caught sound of the man's shrill screamed agony.

Then the newspaper office stormed with a hurricane of flying lead and he dared not show his face. Teton Jackson whirled swiftly and scuttled toward the back room. Darting around the two hand presses, he saw the editor's private desk and veered toward it.

WHILE lead tore and raged through the front of the building, the Union agent searched the desk. He found a pistol and thrust it under his belt. Then he found what he was hoping to find and tucked the papers into his shirt. That done he raced to the rear of the building and slithered out the back door.

Fred Dickens' outlaws had not yet thought of covering the rear. And by the time they did think of it, Teton Jackson was two buildings away. He made sure both pistols were fully loaded. Then, taking a quick breath, he launched himself across the road, both sixguns yammering sudden death. Sound rolled in throbbing thunder down the street, breaking against the buildings and clacking with the snap of lead tearing into doors and smashing at windows.

For a moment the surprise at seeing his racing figure on up the street held the renegades spellbound. Then they cut loose and threw road gravel and dust against his flying boots. A man sagged across a broken window. Another lurched from a doorway and took half a dozen aimless steps before he sagged and died. And Teton too felt the bite of lead. A slicing furrow of fire ate across the small of his back. His leg jerked with the impact of a numbing shock. Ten feet from the street edge Teton felt his balance wavering. With a desperate shove of flagging strength the Union man dove toward cover, feeling the imperious tug of lead drilling the loose leather of his tattered boots as he left the ground. He lit rolling and was behind the protective corner of the corner building.

Shooting died down as he rolled out of sight. Rising carefully, he catfooted to the rear of the building and peered down the littered alley. Reloading both pistols, he eased himself along through the pig weeds and rubble, his narrowed eyes fastened on the rear door of the little cafe where Fred Dickens was holed up with Trudy Pearson. Reaching the door, Teton paused for a moment. A bullet from down the alley slammed into his neck muscles and threw him against the cafe door.

The door gave way and Teton Jackson felt himself falling inside. A woman—Trudy Pearson, he knew—screamed warning from somewhere in front of the partition that divided the kitchen from the cafe front. Teton rolled weakly and felt the hot slop of blood running down his chest. He grabbed a table and pulled himself upright. Lead ate through the partition as Dickens fired blind.

Giving himself a shove, Teton lurched for the doorway into the front part of the cafe. He half-fell through it and his very weakness saved his life. Lead pecked into the wall just about where his head would have been had he not fallen.

Through a red haze, Teton Jackson saw the blurred outline of the traitorous editor lining his pistol for another shot. The Union man jerked his own guns forward and tripped triggers. He shot again and again until both guns were empty, then he sagged down.

He felt the guns being jerked from his lax fingers and heard the metallic click as they were reloaded. He struck out blindly and felt his feeble blows contact soft flesh.

"You're a killer, Teton Jackson," a soft voice said in his ear. "But you're not an outlaw. And—and I was so afraid that I'd fallen in love with an outlaw killer." Teton heard the confession through a ringing that pounded through his whole head.

"You've killed Fred Dickens," the voice went on, "but a bunch of riders are coming down from the hills and I'll need your guns to stand them off. Tobac's going to live, but he can't help now. You've done your part. I—I've got mine to do."

The haze cleared for a moment and Teton Jackson saw the tear-sparkling eyes of Trudy Pearson bent over him. He saw the quivering tenderness of her lips, and he saw the stern set of her jaw as she prepared to stand by the man she had chosen.

"That's Red and—and Scrag Scurley," Teton managed to gasp. "They'll wipe out that outlaw gang now that Dickens is dead." He reached up and tugged at his shirt. "List—every man connected with the gang. Dickens kept list of men he paid."

Trudy Pearson wasn't interested in any list of gun-ring members just then. And she said so as she gathered his bloody, shot-torn form into her arms.

"You're a killer, Teton Jackson, and a Union man," she murmured as a yelling flurry of shots and thundering hooves told of her fighting wire-stringing crew hitting the town. "But I loved you—from the first day I saw you."

Teton grinned. "You'll have lots of time to tell me that," he teased. "I'll be with you for a long time just so I can hear you say it. Me and old Tobac."

Soldier vs. Apache

A Saga of the Indian-Fighting Army

By FAIRFAX DOWNEY

Intrigue of gold-hungry politicians and traders loosed the Apache whirlwind. Then, year after bitter year, massacre wracked the Southwest, and the nation shuddered at the bloody raids of Victorio, Nana—and Geronimo.

WAR clouds had gathered again over Apache Land.

After General Crook was ordered from Arizona in 1875 to participate in the campaign against the Sioux and Cheyennes, his fine accomplishments in the pacification and constructive resettlement of the Apaches disintegrated under the machinations of the "Indian Ring." That nefarious gang of politicians, contractors, and traders balked at nothing in lining their pockets. In vain, Crook's military successors protested; at every turn they were blocked by the short-sighted Indian Bureau, insistent on keeping control.

There were honest agents like John P. Clum, who in 1877 courageously led his Indian police in the arrest of Geronimo and armed tribesmen, but later Clum resigned in disgust at the Bureau's intrigues, with the result that the Apache chief was freed to set out on his long and murderous trail. Yet Clum's type was counterbalanced by agents and traders who could not resist easy profits. Like a long succession of scoundrels before them, dating back to the time of Columbus, they sold liquor and arms to the savages. Here in the Southwest, more victims were augmenting the thousands of slaughtered white men, women, and children whose blood was on the heads of conscienceless fiends who crazed the Indian with firewater and put weapons in his hands.

Prevent the Apache from becoming self-supporting so that lucrative business of selling the Government supplies for him could continue. Such was the policy of the Ring. They played it up to the hilt, confiscating crops, moving the tribes to barren reservations, shifting them again when precious metals were found on the land. They grafted high, wide, and handsomely. An adobe schoolhouse, erected on one reservation at a probable outlay of $9,000, cost the Government $40,000—and then was occupied by the agent as a residence. Indians were thrown into jail and kept there for long periods with no charges preferred. Small wonder that bands broke from the reservations, raided, killing and plundering, and slipped away into the mountains; that drunken Apaches shot down white men including, happily, some of the whiskey-sellers.

The innocent perished with the guilty. A judge and his wife were waylaid and slain and their young son carried off, never to be seen again. All who traveled through the desert under the glare of the sun caught themselves constantly glancing back over their shoulders like superstitious folk passing a cemetery in the dead of night. Nor were they apt to see more of the ghostly Apaches than the flash of their rifles. On the sands, in the smoking ruins of Mexican villages and American ranches and stage stations lay the bodies of people who had been lucky if they died with a bullet through the heart or a crushed skull. Corpses of those with whom the Apaches had had opportunity to deal in a more leisurely fashion were found hanging head down over still-smouldering slow fires, or bound to sharp-spined cactus with green rawhide strips which, tightening under the broiling sun, slowly caused them to be spiked (an Apache improvement on the medieval "Iron Maiden")—or discovered staked beside an ant hill, with a trail of sugar leading to mouths pried open with sharpened sticks.

Not with impunity could the Apache whirlwind be let loose. A great chieftain, Victorio, refusing to be forced on the San Carlos reservation, gathered a hundred warriors and, rivalling Nez Percé Joseph, took the warpath with "a series of the most baffling movements the United States Army ever had to combat in Indian campaigns." He ranged through Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and back and forth across the Mexican border. Detachments of veteran cavalry—troops of the colored Ninth and Tenth and of the Third, Fourth, and Sixth Regiments—led by experienced officers, galloped on the trail of the wily chief and his band. Texas Rangers and posses of cowboys chased him. Seldom did they catch up. The Apaches rode their horses to death and took remounts from the next ranch they raided. At times Victorio was forced to battle or halted to give it on his own chosen ground. Bul-

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lets pinged viciously as soldiers and Indians whittled down each other's strength. That the Apache band dwindled while the troops received replacements discouraged Victorio not at all. Always he beat off his assailants or wriggled out of their grasp just when he seemed to be cornered.

Across the border in Mexico, the chief could usually count on a breathing-spell. He let the villagers and small *rancheros* live as long as they supplied him with food and ammunition. When a Mexican punitive force moved against him, he ambushed and annihilated it; then lay in wait for its relief party and wiped it out.

IT was nearly two years before Victorio was at last brought to bay. A combined United States and Mexican expedition trailed him into a box canyon in the Tres Castillos Mountains of Mexico. As soon as all seemed set for the kill, the Mexican commander "blandly requested" his American allies to return to their own side of the border. His excuse was that the United States Army's Apache scouts, who had done the successful trailing, were too wild and might join the enemy. Swearing-mad, the Americans could do nothing but retire. The Mexicans then sprung their trap on the unsuspecting band in the canyon. Victorio and his men died fighting.

Their spirits rode on in the person of Nana, Victorio's sub-chief, and the three warriors who had been absent with him on a mission when the last fight took place. Other "broncho" Apaches rallied to them. Old Nana, seventy and rheumatic, outdid the feats of his dead leader. From July, 1881, to April, 1882, he led troops a chase of a thousand miles, slaying herders, prospectors, and settlers in his course, and fighting eight battles. Taking refuge for a time in Mexico, he later joined Geronimo. He died "unreconstructed" on an Oklahoma reservation at a great age.

Other chiefs began raiding across the border from their bases on old Mexico. And now the ravaged frontier faced an even more menacing development. Among the Apaches rose a medicine man who declared he possessed the power of bringing the dead to life, once the living had swept the white men from the country.

Many warriors had perished under the stubborn and persistent, though inconclusive, warfare waged against them by two nations. A desperate people turns readily in its extremity to belief in supernatural aid. Nor is this confined to savages alone, as witness the visions of British troops in a disastrous battle of the first World War: shining legions, "The Angels of Mons," fighting at their side. Like the Apaches now, the Sioux a few years later would place their hopes in the unearthly.

With the ferocious Apache becoming fanatical, the situation was infinitely more threatening. Headquarters ordered the arrest of the medicine man, Nock-ay-del-Klinne. Colonel Eugene A. Carr, with Captain E. C. Hentig, Sixth Cavalry, two troops and a company of Apache scouts commanded by Lieutenant Thomas Cruse, descended on the reservation in August, 1881, and made the arrest. Amid the scowling looks of the Indians, the medicine man was marched off under charge of Sergeant MacDonald who had orders to shoot the prisoner at the first sign of an attack.

Young Lieutenant Cruse felt the tingling tenseness of the moment. He knew Indians. That was why he was a scout commander. Cruse, apprehensive of the Apaches hovering on the flanks of the column as it moved out, could not even be certain of his own scouts. For days their strange behavior had led him to suspect that they had been infected by the general fanaticism, and on one occasion he had ordered them disarmed.

The column marched a few miles toward Fort Apache and made camp at a place called Cibicu. It was then that the trouble Cruse dreaded happened. Red riders, their Winchesters cracking, swept in on the troops. The lieutenant saw hell break loose within his lines. The Apache scouts, hitherto loyal to the Army blue they wore, men who served valiantly in many a fight against hostiles, now mutinied. They shot Captain Hentig in the back, wounding him mortally. Under their blasting volley, nine enlisted men fell dead or wounded. Sergeant MacDonald, before he dropped, put a bullet in the medicine man's head, followed by two more from Trumpeter Ahren's Colt.

In the face of that treacherous attack, Colonel Carr stood "calm and unruffled as if in his own parlor," though bullets fired

at a range of fifty feet whizzed past him. Every officer, trooper, and packer rallied and steadily and coolly cleared the plateau. They held it through the late afternoon until firing ceased with the coming of darkness. Then as the dead were being buried, a ghastly episode took place. Sergeant John A. Smith, in charge of the detail, caught a glimpse of movement in the shadows. The medicine man, supposedly dead with three bullets in his head, was dragging himself away through the sagebrush. If he escaped to his people, none would doubt his immortality. Smith's hand went to his revolver, came away empty. A shot would alarm the camp and perhaps bring on another attack. He seized an ax—struck twice with finality.

The command slipped away in the night, with its wounded, some of them dying, and its scout prisoners, and marched hard for Fort Apache, now isolated and besieged. Indians had chopped down the telegraph poles and killed repairmen. Carr might not have won through, had not Sergeant Will C. Barnes of the Signal Corps ridden out of the fort, climbed a mesa surrounded by hostiles and semaphored the news of Carr's approach. A sortie cleared the way for the oncoming column and rescued the brave sergeant who was awarded a well-deserved Medal of Honor.

Three of the Apache scout mutineers were hanged and others sent to Alcatraz. Though the frenzy inspired by the dead medicine man subsided, the frontier was still aflame. More Americans and Mexicans died under the guns and war clubs of Apache raiders. Pursuing troops continued to use Apache scouts. As true as ever was the saying: "It takes an Apache to catch an Apache."

The scouts did not again betray their trust.

WATER, pre-eminent problem of desert warfare, dictated the maneuvers of this campaign in the Southwest. Every long march must be based on streams and waterholes. The Apaches, with their iron endurance, could stand thirst hours longer than troops. When they lacked water, a pebble, kept in parched mouths, served. To obtain a carrier they would kill a horse, sketchily clean the long intestine, fill it with water and wind it around their bodies. It would hold enough to sustain them for days.

In arid country the Army depended on canteens and casks on pack mules. In addition, Lieutenant Colonel "Sandy" Forsyth—he of the epic defense of Beecher's Island—employed a novel water-supply scheme. Since dry marches lay ahead of him in his pursuit of Chief Loco's band, he wired for a tank car of water to meet him at a railroad station on his route. Watering the horses of his four troops of the Fourth Cavalry from camp kettles filled at the car faucets, Forsyth mounted up and rode to intercept the hostiles at Horseshoe Cannon in the Stein's Peak Mountains.

This time the Apaches were encumbered by women and children. Lieutenant D. N. McDonald, in advance with a small body of scouts, cut their trail on April 22, 1882. Right in his face, Apache rifles blazed over the top of a rock, killing four of his men. The lieutenant held on and sent a courier galloping back for help. Fortunately the man was mounted on a troop race horse. His headlong dash to Forsyth killed the animal just as he arrived. "Left turn. Trot. Gallop," the colonel shouted. Through infernal heat and stifling dust clouds the pace never slackened for sixteen miles. Somehow their fine mounts stood it. They thundered up to the canyon on time to rescue McDonald and the surviving scouts. Inexorably they forced the red riflemen back from their rocky redoubts, leaving thirteen dead behind them and carrying not a few wounded.

During the night the Apaches slipped off into Mexico. But there retribution was awaiting them. Colonel Lorenzo Garcia, with two hundred and fifty men of the Sixth Mexican Infantry, ambushed them in a canyon. Unluckily the women and children were in the van and they formed the majority of those killed by Garcia's smashing attack. Too many warriors escaped.

Another outbreak in July drew fourteen troops of the Third and Sixth Cavalry into the field, moving in three columns toward a concentration. One column was led by Captain Adna R. Chaffee. He was the kind of officer men will follow anywhere. His troopers remembered that shout of his in the Kiowa-Comanche campaign of the '70's: "Forward! If any man is killed, I'll make him a corporal." Fortunate in

having the services of Al Sieber, one of the greatest white scouts of the Indian wars, Chaffee ran down the Apaches at Chevelon's Fork of the Little Colorado River.

It is an eerie, forbidding place. The plateau is gashed by Devil's Canyon, seven hundred yards across, precipitous sides descending sheer to the stream sparkling in the depths a thousand beet below. Concealed on the farther edge of the canyon, the Apaches had laid a trap, but Sieber's sharp eyes spotted it. Chaffee sent a gray horse troop up on the opposite rim.

The command of Major Andrew W. Evans, which included another gray horse troop, now reached the scene. Watching Apaches, spying those light-colored hides, confused them with Chaffee's troops and did not suspect reinforcements had arrived. Although Evans ranked, he generously told Chaffee, "You have located the Indians, and it is your fight."

Rifles cracked across the canyon. Keeping the hostiles occupied, the keen Chaffee sent two detachments east and west to flank them. Down into the chasm on narrow, perilous paths clambered daring officers and troopers, then dragged themselves up the steep opposite side. Had they been caught in that climb—often hanging on only by fingers clutching overhanging rocks and toe-holds in a crevice—they would have been slaughterd like sheep. Undetected, they made it. The party to the east closed in and captured the pony herd. Debouching through a pine wood where evening shadows were beginning to fall, they struck the surprised Apaches. Sieber's deadly rifle caught three warriors in as many minutes as they turned from the rim to face him. Their bodies plunged head first into the dreadful depths.

The second detachment had barely reached the top when they met a group of the enemy, bound on the same flanking mission. They smashed them back with a volley. The Blue pincers tightened its grip. From the east the troopers pushed forward in spite of casualties. A little Irish sergeant, dropped with a bullet through the throat, was given up as dead, but as soon as he could talk he protested that he was "not kilt, only spacheless." Lieutenant Cruse led a charge through the woods that won him a Medal of Honor. Night fell and a heavy rain. Leaving sixteen dead and with many wounded, the Apaches slunk back to their reservation. The Army's casualties were only two killed and seven wounded.

AND so it went. Soldier vs. Apache. A war of extermination. Though it might drag out for some years longer, its end could be foreseen. If it were granted that this war, as a struggle for land between two peoples with different ways of life, could not have been avoided—even if that were conceded, a question could be asked and was asked. Could not some settlement of the problem, as fair as possible under the circumstances, still be made?

In 1882 the Government made an honest attempt to find a solution. General Crook was reassigned to the command of the Department of Arizona.

At once Crook began to build on the wreckage of his earlier reforms. He made the rounds of the agencies to hear the Indians' grievances. Mounted on his riding mule, Apache, he took a small escort and risked his life by riding into the mountains to visit the hostiles. Two-thirds of them were persuaded by him to return to the reservations. Everywhere the tribes took heart at the coming of the bushy-whiskered general they remembered and still trusted. He threw trespassing squatters and miners off Indian land. He started the Apaches growing crops and raising stock again. As strict as he was just, he insisted that all warriors on the reservations be regularly counted, and told them that the brewing and drinking of *tiswin* (corn beer) must stop. Where he found corruption at an agency —sometimes "extending all the way to Washington"—he crushed it with the full powers given him by the Government.

The Indian Ring, its graft dwindling, fought him at every turn. It pulled every wire it could lay hands on, stirred up trouble and spread rumors of new hostilities. Crook investigated and spiked the reports. His trusted officers at the reservations, men who knew how to handle Indians, faithfully carried out his policies. The Apaches were on the way toward being pacified and settled, nearly reconciled by decent treatment to following the white man's path instead of fighting to the death in desperation.

But there was still a band of five hundred Apaches of the Chiricahua clan at large in mountain refuges of the Sierra Madres of Mexico. Under their chiefs, Chatto, Natchez, and Geronimo, they were raiding across into the United States. Crook realized he would have to act, and now, by special treaty with Mexico, he was enabled to pursue across the border.

The general made his usual thorough preparations. He brought the pack trains to the state of high efficiency he demanded. Organizing companies of Apache scouts, he placed in command of them such able officers as Captain Emmet Crawford and Wirt Davis, and Lieutenants Charles B. Gatewood, Marion P. Mans and Britton Davis. These scouts could move farther and faster than any white cavalry.

Crook marched in the summer of '83. His name for being terrible as well as just shortened the campaign. After several fights three hundred Apaches came in and surrendered, eventually followed by Geronimo with others.

Unfortunately politics would not let the peace last. A new agent took over at the San Carlos reservation, and there was friction between him and Army officers, discord between the Departments of War and Interior. The Indian Ring enthusiastically abetted the strife. Although Crook strenuously protested, the harm had been done. Relaxation of a firm hand on the Apaches resulted in a *tiswin* spree by Geronimo and his braves. Lieutenant Davis promptly reported by wire through his immediate superior to General Crook. The message, through the disgraceful negligence or poor judgment of the intermediate officer, was not relayed. Geronimo and his band skipped the reservation and escaped to Mexico. In the course of a fruitless pursuit, the gallant Captain Crawford, one of the Army's most valuable officers, was killed in a fight which flared up between his men and Mexican irregulars when the latter fired on the Americans' Apache scouts.

Crook never gave up. He arranged a conference with Geronimo. Very possibly the general was entering a parley from which, like Canby in the Modoc War, he might not emerge alive. Nevertheless he did not hesitate.

The Army and the frontier knew Geronimo as a treacherous, bloodthirsty and infinitely cruel savage. General Miles called him "the worst Indian who ever lived." To his own people the chief was a champion whose hatred of the invader dated from that day in his early manhood when Mexicans massacred his mother, wife, and three children. Crook, without illusions as to Geronimo, confronted him sternly and offered him a choice: Surrender or a war which would destroy him "if it took fifty years."

Geronimo made it a condition of his surrender that if he and his band were sent east, warriors be not separated from their families and the exile last no longer than two years. Crook, anxious to spare the frontier further bloodshed, accepted that condition, and the agreement was closed.

Troops and Apaches prepared to march north. But that night a criminal act was committed which led to the sacrifice of scores of lives before peace was achieved in the Southwest.

A miscreant named Tribollet sneaked into the Indian camp and bootlegged *mescal.* Geronimo and his braves got roaring drunk With a few of their women and children they stole away from the rest of the tribe and vanished in the Sierra Madres.

Lieutenant-General Sheridan, far away in Washington, had not appreciated Crook's sound reason for accepting a conditional surrender. Believing that Geronimo's defection justified a repudiation of the promise made, he wired that terms of surrender must be renegotiated with the remainder of the Apaches, terms without any condition except that lives would be spared.

Crook had passed his word. His integrity allowed him no other step than that which he now took. He wired Sheridan:

"I believe that the plan upon which I have conducted operations is one most likely to prove successful in the end. It may be, however, that I am too much wedded to my own views in this matter, and as I have spent nearly eight years of the hardest work of my life in this department, I respectfully request that I may be now relieved from its command."

On April 2, 1886, General Miles was ordered to replace Crook. Between these two lay friendship and mutual respect. Miles had not asked the assignment. Ac-

cepting it in obedience to orders, he took up Crook's task, blocked on the verge of completion by remote command.

MILES, arriving in Arizona, introduced a valuable device for communication.

Here was an encouraging action. Too often has the United States Army failed to keep abreast of modern developments in armament, equipment, and methods of warfare. That failure has been the fault of moss-backs and old fogeys in the Service who, attaining high rank and becoming set in their ways, resist innovations, and of false-economy legislators who refuse appropriations strenuously urged by forward-looking military men. Long neglect of the Gatling gun has been mentioned. Not until 1882 were magazine rifles adopted; though available many years, troops had been equipped with the single-shot Springfield. Such obtuseness, to call it by a mild name—such criminal neglect, to brand it frankly, for it costs many lives—would persist through the Indian wars and thereafter. It would still be rife when the German threat of 1940 found us woefully deficient in air power, tanks, artillery, *et cetera.*

Miles' device was the heliostat. That tripod-mounted mirror, which by reflecting sunlight can flash Morse code fifty miles or more, had been invented many years before by an English officer and used in India. Miles, noticing some of these instruments in the Signal Corps office in Washington, had requisitioned them and tried them in the Northwest. They should prove ideal in dry, sunny Arizona and New Mexico, where telegraph lines were sparse and the crafty Apaches chopped down their poles at every opportunity.

Obtaining special signal details to operate the helios, Miles established twenty-seven stations on peaks in a district six hundred miles square and gave each a strong infantry guard. They worked magnificently, transmitting more than two thousand messages, some of them relayed hundreds of miles. They would play an important part throughout the campaign.

Miles had five thousand men, two thousand more than Crook. He pushed them into the field, guarding passes and waterholes, as Geronimo resumed his raids, killing and torturing. In command of his main flying column, Miles placed Captain H. W. Lawton, Fourth Cavalry. That splendid soldier, destined to die in action as a lieutenant-general in the distant Phillppine, was a fine-looking man, standing six feet five inches and correspondingly powerful. Serving with him was another athlete, Acting Assistant Surgeon Leonard Wood, whom Lawton would praise for doing the work of three men: surgeon, infantry officer, and leader of scouts. Before Wood lay a brilliant future—Colonel of the Rough Riders, Chief of Staff, U. S. Army, and Commander of a first-rate World War division he would not be permitted to accompany to France. Seeing his first action in this campaign was another great soldier, a graduate of the West Point class of 1886 who joined the Sixth Cavalry as a second lieutenant to fight the Apaches, then the Sioux; to storm San Juan Hill, chase Villa through Mexico and finally, a four-star general, to command the A. E. F. His name, of course, was John J. Pershing.

Pursuit and sharp fights in the mountains. Terrible marches where even pack mules keeled over but the troops pressed on through the burning heat, living on game and in the last extremity of thirst opening their veins to drink their blood. Soldiers and Apache scouts hung on to the trails relentlessly, the bright, winking eyes of the heliostat directing them, keeping them in touch. Ponies and supplies were captured, yet still the hostiles, suffering few casualties, eluded every attempt to round them up. They never numbered as many as eighty warriors, but it took sixteen months to bring them in.

The principal part in the last act was played by a lieutenant.

ON the rumor that Natchez and Geronimo might at last be willing to surrender, Miles sent Lieutenant Charles G. Gatewood, whose fine record as a leader of Apache scouts proved his understanding of Indians, to parley with the chiefs. Gatewood ventured deep into the mountains with a small escort, knowing that at any moment he might be ambushed despite his flag of truce. He got on Geronimo's trail and arranged a meeting which he attended accompanied by only three men. He knew he was taking his life in his hands when

he faced the uncertain Geronimo, but his was the high courage that dares being shot down in cold blood.

The chief asked what message Miles had sent. Gatewood's reply was firm and unhesitant, though he knew these words might be his last:

"Surrender, and you will be sent with your families to Florida, there to wait the decision of the President as to your final disposition. Accept these terms or fight it out."

After a nerve-wracking delay of a day and night, Geronimo gave his answer. He would go to Miles and surrender. Gatewood and Lawton brought the still-armed band in, fending off two hundred Mexican soldiers, eager to fall on the Apaches and slaughter them. Miles received the surrender.

Here the helios worked their magic. Geronimo watched a heligraph receive news of his brother on a reservation two hundred miles away. In superstitious awe, the chief sent word to Natchez, still in the mountains, that in the face of this strange power he had best give himself up.

The aftermath is another dark page in the record of the white man's treatment of the Indian. Miles had promised the Apaches they would not be separated from their families. As in the case of the Nez Percés, the Government voided his word. An even blacker instance of bad faith was the removal to the east of tribesmen on the Fort Apache reservation, many of whom had served the Army loyally as scouts against their own people. Outspoken protests by Army officers were disregarded. Over a period of years the Apache exiles were shifted from Florida to Alabama, then to Oklahoma. Advocates of Indian rights in 1907 succeeded in arranging the return of a remnant of two hundred and fifty to New Mexico.

A blot on Army annals, where stand too many other instances of injustices, is the case of Lieutenant Gatewood. For his gallantry and eminent part in affecting the surrender of Geronimo, he received no other recognition nor reward than casual mention in despatches. Gatewood took it like the good soldier he was. He served on through the Sioux campaign where bitter cold after the scorching heat of Arizona undermined his health and he was on the sick list for a year. Returning to duty, he was injured by a dynamite explosion while fighting a post fire. Still a first lieutenant, with a wife and two young children, he was retired on half pay. His wife received a pension of seventeen dollars a month when he died in 1895. Somehow love of the Service persisted in the family. Lieutenant Gatewood's son entered the Army and rose to be a colonel.

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The law needed men along the gold creeks. But Burne had failed three times—and here was his nemesis, facing him.

Desperately, Burne tried to sidestep, but the Colt caught him first.

GOLD-RUSH GUNS

By M. HOWARD LANE

BURNE ROBERTS stepped from his small tent into the freshness of a Southern Sierra morning, and an involuntary grin moved his lips as he sighted Bob Gray, the young Argonaut who'd staked the gulch claim above his own. Gray was hunched down beside the narrow creek that ran through their claims slapping icy water over his face and crisp blond hair. At the sting of each double handful, the lanky youth shuddered and groaned.

Burne moved down to the water for his own morning wash, and sent a cheerful hail upstream. "Mornin', Gray. Looks like you had yourself a time in Keysville last night—"

Bob Gray climbed to his feet and stumbled downstream before answering. He leaned against a granite boulder, and his clean-cut young face was haggard.

With shaking fingers he rubbed the blond stubble along his jaw, and shook his head as though to clear it.

"Everything is still foggy." He spoke almost like a man talking to himself.

Burne hunkered back on his heels, and grinned sympathetically. "Talk sometimes straightens things out for a feller," he suggested.

"I dunno," Bob Gray shook his head again. "I sure don't remember much of what happened. Seems like I started for the Chink's to have me a good meal, and than I figgered a drink first would make it taste better."

Burne's gray-green eyes steadied on the youngster. "Where'd you take that drink?" he asked softly.

"At Trey Merlo's *Whisky Barrel,*" Gray admitted. "I know you told me that was a good place to stay away from, but somehow I got in there just the same. One drink seemed to lead to another. Some floozie got me to dancin', and I recollect buying her a bottle of champagne. After that I dunno just what happened. I kinda remember being invited to set in a back-room poker game."

"Was Merlo in it?" Burne asked bluntly.

Gray nodded. "I recall looking at that boiled shirt he wears, and wondering how he managed to keep it looking so danged clean. Seems like I was winning, too—"

"Nobody beats Trey Merlo," Burne Roberts told the youngster, and he was thinking back to smoky saloons in Hangtown, and Grass Valley, and Sacramento. "No," he added softly, "nobody has beaten Trey Merlo, yet—"

"You act like you've known the cuss before." Bob Gray focused his blue eyes on the bronzed man looking up at him. Burne Roberts wasn't over medium height and he didn't look particularly husky, but Bob Gray had watched him shovel sand and gravel into his rocker from dawn until dark without showing any sign of fatigue. And that wasn't all that made Burne Roberts something of an enigma to this booming Kern River mining district. He had gained himself quite a reputation for being about the only man who walked Keysville streets without a pair of Colts and a Bowie strapped to his belt. Another odd thing about Burne Roberts was that he kept himself meticulously clean-shaven in a camp where most men wore full beards. He looked to be about thirty-five, but there was a quiet remoteness in his eyes that spoke of wisdom gained beyond his years.

"You seem to have known this Merlo?" Bob Gray probed again.

Burne stood up and fumbled a pipe and tobacco pouch out of his pocket, but he was not seeing his hands on the briar and leather. He was seeing instead gunsmoke ghosts rising from a past he had been trying hard to forget.

"Yes, kid," he said slowly, "I've known Trey Merlo. We were along the Sacramento and American together—on different sides of the fence. My job was to keep the law. I wore the marshal's star in Hangtown, Grass Valley, and Sacramento. I've killed my share of men, and I've picked up a few nicks doin' it."

The very quietness of his voice held Bob Gray motionless. "Go on," he said faintly.

Burne hardly heard the youth. "I saw the elephant in 'Forty-nine," he said flatly. "Trey Merlo crossed the Trace in the same train with me. He opened a saloon in Hangtown. I went to mining. One night my claim was jumped, and what gold I had was stolen. One of the bunch doin' it was Merlo. I recognized him, and the next mornin' I went to town to see the marshal. He'd been killed the night before. I put on the star, and went to see Merlo myself. He carries a sleeve gun, and he outdrew me, and put me out of circulation for two months. When I was on my feet again, he'd pulled out.

"I'd turned in my star, and there was nothing left for me in Hangtown, I moved to Grass Valley, and put on another badge as deputy marshal. Seems like I was always handier with guns than a pick and shovel. Merlo rode in and opened a place pretty soon after I got there. He took my measure again. Made a right big fool out of me by walkin' me down main street in front of his gun. The Valley warn't no place for me after that.

"I moved down to Sacramento. Seems like Bullet Roberts, that's how folks had twisted my name, had gained himself some fame. More than one gun-tough figgered to build himself a rep by notchin' his Colt for me. The law needed men, it always needs men. I did my shootin' with it to

back me, but each time I had to kill a man it made me sick inside."

"Then Trey Merlo showed up again," Bob Gray guessed.

Burne nodded, and smiled thinly at the pipe and tobacco in his hands. "And buffaloed me," he said flatly. "One man who had my number. Lead from his sleeve gun smashed my leg all to hell. I spent three months in a private hospital. When I got out Trey was going strong in a place he'd opened. My job was still open for me, but I couldn't take it. Mebbe I didn't have guts. I dunno. Seemed right then like all I wanted was peace.

"So I headed down the coast to Southern California. Found me a rancho in San Fernando Valley, shucked my guns, shaved my beard and mustache so gunslicks wantin' to add my name to their record wouldn't recognize me, and started raisin' cattle."

Burne fell silent, his gray-green eyes haunted. The last two years of peace had been but a travesty. For he knew now that he would find no peace until either he or Trey Merlo died in gunsmoke.

WITH SOMETHING of an effort, Burne dragged his attention back to the young Argonaut. "That's enough about me," he said flatly. "Get on with your story. You were settin' in a back-room game in Merlo's Whisky Barrel."

"And I think I was winning," Bob Gray repeated stubbornly, "but my poke was flatter'n a pancake when I pulled it out of my pants this morning. Fact is, I dunno how I even got home. Somebody must have roped me in my mule's saddle, and turned the critter loose. He brought me in, and I managed to untie myself and get to bed. Last thing I recollect is thinking that I'd been smart to take your advice and hide most of my dust before heading for town.

"However," his brow wrinkled, "I kinda remember blowing some about it. But it don't matter much. It was my last big night. My sister, Mary, is coming in on the morning stage from San Bernardino. Claims she's going to keep camp for me, and pan some gold for herself. She'll keep my feet on the straight and narrow, all right."

Burne shook his dark head, and his face showed misgiving. "This ain't no camp for a woman, Gray," he said morosely, and headed back for his own camp.

There was going to be trouble, he reflected bleakly, and he cursed the dry blue skies that had forced him to come here to Kern River in these rugged Southern Sierras. Those skies had shed no rain, and his cattle were starving on their San Fernando range. Feed cost more than a man could afford to pay when the money-changers in *El Pueblo de los Angeles* wanted fifteen per cent per month to loan their cash.

So he had packed one mule, saddled another, and joined the Kern River rush of 'Fifty-five. Finding this claim had been more a matter of luck than anything else. It was in a narrow, high-sided wash sloping steeply upward from Tulare Creek. Trees and brush had grown so close over the mouth of the wash that hundreds of stampeding miners had passed it unnoticed.

Only the blond young Argonaut, Bob Gray, and himself had taken the trouble to look for the source of the narrow stream that entered Tulare Creek at this point. Gray had gotten here first and staked the upper claim. He had generously revealed the creek's wealth to Burne, and Burne had posted the lower claim.

Both of them had been working now for better than two months, and Burne figured he was averaging about ten dollars a day, with each shovelful growing richer as he cut closer to bedrock.

"When I hit bottom," Burne thought, as he squatted beside his breakfast fire stirring bacon and broken biscuits in the skillet, "I'll have enough to buy feed and then some." Then he forced his thoughts away from the future.

Brush rattling down at the mouth of Lost Gulch, as he and Bob Gray had christened it, roused Burne. He heard the scrabble of hoofs over stone, the sound of voices, then four horsemen came sweeping recklessly around his tent. Dust spurted from beneath the hoofs of their mounts.

"Ho, sorry, *amigo!*" the leader of the troop called. "But you got no call to have your cook-fire where a rider can't see it."

Dust was settling like a veil over the pan of hot food. Burne watched it and he heard a second stocky member of the foursome laugh nastily.

"To hell with it," the dark-faced breed

said. "Let's get on with this Gray business."

Burne lifted his gray-green eyes slowly, and let them play over the face of the first speaker. The man was small, swarthy. Smooth black hair roached back in a V from his forehead. It gave his narrow face a peculiar satanic cast. Trey Merlo was still garbed in his immaculate black and white. Burne looked at the gambler, and waited to be recognized.

Merlo's coal-black eyes flicked down at him, and Burne read no recognition there.

"Drop in and I'll buy you a drink for spoilin' that grub," Merlo drawled affably, and set spurs again into the flanks of his expensive black mount. The gambler's henchmen followed after him. Burne watched them go and then he looked at the pan of gritty food.

"If I had the time," he muttered, "I'd eat it anyway. But I'm afeard I ain't going to have the time."

For Trey Merlo's chilly laugh had drifted back to him from the camp close upstream.

"Howdy, son," the saloonkeeper was drawling to Bob Gray, "we've come out to refresh your memory on a little matter you couldn't handle last night."

BURNE ROSE from his fire, and he felt a sudden spring in his legs that hadn't been there in a long time. He was almost smiling as he moved quietly upstream toward Gray's camp. The youngster's own tent sheltered him from sight of the men grouped beyond it. Pausing close behind the canvas shelter, his ears picked up their conversation.

"Me?" Bob Gray still sounded a little dazed. "I—I guess I don't savvy you, Mr. Merlo."

"Let me take a gun-barrel to his skull, Trey," the squat breed growled. "That'll wake him up quick enough."

"Now, Guffer," Merlo's voice was smooth, "don't be hasty. I have a little paper here which will refresh Gray's memory quickly enough."

Burne moved to a corner of the tent where he could see what was going on beyond, and a cold knot had formed in his stomach.

Merlo was leaning gracefully down from his saddle holding a square of white paper close enough for Bob Gray to read the writing on it. Burne noticed that the gambler did not hand the paper to the youth.

"IOU five thousand dollars." The words seemed pulled from the young Argonaut's lips. "An' it's got my name to it. Mr. Merlo," the boy's eyes rose desperately, "I didn't sign no such paper. Why, I was winnin' in your game last night."

"No, my boy," Trey Merlo shook his black head sadly, "you must have been more tipsy than I thought. Why, I wouldn't have loaned you this money to play if I'd thought you would try and welch on me. You told me you had gold to cover this cached here at your camp, and that I could have it this morning."

"That's a lie!" Bob Gray's voice trembled with hot anger. "I ain't got that much here. Mebbe, a couple thousand, but you ain't going to get it!"

"Oh, we'll get it." Trey Merlo's voice had the ominous flatness of a rattler's whirring buttons. "You wouldn't like to have your sister arrive just in time to attend your funeral, would you?"

"Mary?" The youth's voice was hoarse. "What do you know—?"

"I know she is coming on the morning stage," Trey Merlo rapped. "I understand she is pretty enough to make a nice dancing partner for my patrons. If you don't want that to happen, friend Gray, you will fork over what dinero you've got on hand, and ride peaceably back to Keysville with us. There you will sign over this claim to cover the balance."

Burne turned and headed back toward his own tent. Anger made him heedless of his footing. One heavy boot crushed through dry brush, and behind him he heard the sudden thunder of hoofs, and a wild yell.

"That cuss on the next claim has been listenin', boss!— I'll teach him to poke his nose in other folks' business!"

Burne recognized Guffer's roaring voice, and he broke into a quick run but the horse beneath the Whisky Barrel tough was faster. Back tensed for the expected shock of lead, Burne heard instead the rush of the animal coming closer and closer. Then Guffer's big mount was alongside him, and its rider was reaching out and slashing down with the long barrel of his Colt.

Desperately, Burne tried to sidestep, but the Colt caught him first. He felt it glance off the base of his skull, and land solidly across his shoulders. Tawny earth rose to meet his face, and his arms would not lift to protect him.

THROUGH EYES caked half shut with blood, Burne watched the foursome and their prisoner ride from Lost Gulch. Bob Gray sagged in his saddle, shoulders too heavy to lift.

When they had passed through the screening brush at the mouth of the wash, Burne tried to lift himself. Pain gouged through his head like the tines of a pitchfork, but he managed to make his hands and knees.

"Get on your feet," he told himself fiercely, "get up. This had to come sometime, and yuh've known it."

The creek was to the right, singing its merry song. Burne crawled down to the water, and the coldness of it against his skin drove some of the pain from his head. Using a boulder for support, he made his feet and felt some of the elasticity coming back into his muscles.

Time was important, his numbed brain kept reminding him. Once the kid signed over his claim, killing Merlo wouldn't help Bob Gray much. The thought pushed Burne to his own tent, and the rawhide saddle roll he had packed before pulling out from his San Fernando ranch.

Rolled carefully in oiled silk were the guns he had shucked in Sacramento. He hadn't counted on bringing them along on this trip to Kern River, and yet some strange compulsion at the last minute had forced him to pack the Colts with the rest of his gear.

He left his tent, with two black Colts snug at his thighs. He flipped the guns from holster leather once, and his wrists were limber as they had ever been. He looked down the shining barrels, and gray ghosts loomed beyond the sights. Ghosts of places and men. Of smoky barrooms, of dusty streets, and dead men lying there. He had tried to forget that past, but now it was with him again as vividly as though it had just been lived. And he knew, dismally, that it would stay with him as long as doubt remained in his mind.

Doubt that would remain with him until either he or Trey Merlo lay dead with gunsmoke wreathing their bodies.

He flung saddle and bridle on his riding mule, and the effort brought pulsing pain into his head again. When he was through, he had to lean against the animal before he could find the strength to mount.

Trey Merlo had won three times out of three. But it had been different then. He'd worn a star on his vest, he'd been fighting for the law. This time more than law was at stake. The life of a youngster and his sister might be forfeited if he failed.

MINERS along Tulare Creek watched a bloody-faced apparition appear from the trees shrouding Lost Gulch. They recognized Burne Roberts, all right, and they blinked at the guns riding his hips—guns they'd never seen before—they sensed the grim compulsion on the rider who passed them so unseeingly. And almost to a man they dropped their gold pans, and left their rockers, and followed after like children trailing the Pied Piper out of Hamelin town.

Keysville was a cluster of hastily erected shanties and tent houses. The main street was wide and deep with dust from the wheels of ten-mule teams that brought freight wagons from Los Angeles and San Bernardino. Burne rode the street toward the District Recorder's Office almost opposite Trey Merlo's Whisky Barrel Saloon, and the chill inside his body made him forget the pain in his own head.

Four horses and a mule were tied to the hitch rack in front of the Recorder's when he rode up. One of them was Merlo's sleek black. Burne felt his lips start to twist.

There were three gun-toughs inside with Trey Merlo, but Burne was past counting odds. He tethered his mule, was unconscious of the crowd that had gathered on the street behind him.

On steady feet, he climbed the steps and pushed open the closed door of the Recorder's office. The Recorder was a wispy, gray-haired man with steel-rimmed glasses usually pressed high on his forehead. But they were across the bridge of his nose now as he peered nearsightedly at the huge ledger spread on the counter in front of him.

The five of them were there. Trey Merlo

and his gunslicks, and a slump-shouldered youth who seemed to have lost all interest in life. All of them were watching the Recorder thumb his dog-eared ledger.

"Cain't seem to find where Gray recorded and signed for his original claim," the Recorder said nasally.

"You'd better!" Trey Merlo answered softly.

They hadn't noticed him yet, Burne realized, and he knew that he should have his guns in his hands before he spoke, but he wanted no doubts when this was over.

"Yes," he said flatly, "you'd better! And when you do it might be smart to check the signature on the IOU Trey Merlo holds against the way Bob Gray signed after stakin' his claim."

"Why, you—"

Trey Merlo had whirled. So had his henchmen. Merlo had the paper Burne had seen before in one hand. Surprise held the foursome momentarily, then Guffer's heavy voice broke the silence.

"It's that cuss I pistol-whipped—"

Burne kept his eyes on Merlo. "Trey," he murmured softly, "you ever figger what I might look like with a short beard and mustache?"

"Roberts!" Merlo's lips tightened against his teeth. "Bullet Roberts!" Light flamed in his black eyes. "Three times. You're easy—"

"I've got more to fight for this time, Trey," Burne murmured softly. "A kid, and his sister, a claim of my own, and a bunch of cattle starving out in the San Fernando. Mebbe even more than that. You're ridin' high but you won't stop. Bob Gray ain't the only man who will be framed out of his claim. Grab your gun, mister! This is for keeps—"

"THREE TIMES!" Trey Merlo was almost chuckling, and one hand was slipping to the sleeve that cloaked his opposite arm.

Burne had his hands moving hipward, and he saw the ghosts of dead men between himself and the gambler fading as he reached. His guns came from leather with a remembered speed, and then they were bucking in his hands before steel flipped from the gambler's sleeve. He saw Trey Merlo swing his short weapon even as a red splotch widened across the man's white shirt front.

Merlo fired one shot. It scored the boards between Burne Roberts' feet, and then his gun-arm sagged. A baffled expression crossed his swarthy face. "Easy," he whispered the word. "Fourth time—"

"The third," Burne said, "tain't always the charm—"

From behind the counter the Recorder had hauled a stubby shotgun. "I ain't much of a shot," he was proclaiming, "but there's enough blue whistlers in this thing so I cain't miss yuh all. Seems like this is a private fight, and I'm here to see it ends that way—"

Burne watched Trey Merlo bury his face into the floor of the Recorder's office, and something that was hard to define filled him. Of only one thing was he certain. The future would hold no doubts.

Outside he heard the rattle of dry fellowes in coach wheels, and he knew the morning stage was coming in. Bob Gray stepped toward him, and the youth's face was drawn and haggard.

"Cheer up, kid," Burne told him. "Go and meet your sister. There's goin' to be a funeral, but the box will carry a different man. You hombres," he had his gray-green eyes on Guffer and the other two, "might find some other town healthier than this one. When word of how you tried to cold-deck Gray gets about you might not find Keysville so pleasant."

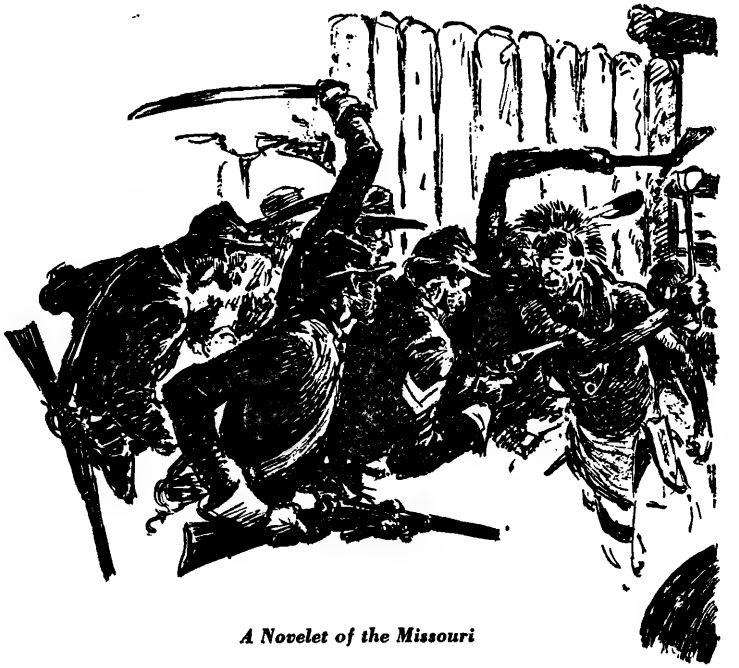
"There's always Los Angeles," he heard Guffer mutter, and the pair with him nodded.

Burne nodded. He had seen this pattern before. Guffer and the rest would be gone before the day was out. They would worry Keysville no longer. His eyes turned to Bob Gray who had come alongside him.

"You're coming with me to meet the stage," the young Argonaut said firmly. "I've got a hunch Mary is going to like you!"

Burne looked down at the shining Colts in his hands, and he knew in his heart that the guns would never have to be wrapped in oiled silk again. He could wear them with pride.

"Yes," he agreed with a queer new excitement riding high in him, "I'll come with you."



A Novelet of the Missouri

BIG MUDDY MASSACRE

By CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

Fort Benton was a powderkeg—stake in a feud between a man who loved power, and a man who loved his boat.

A SWARM of toiling, sweating roustabouts moved past each other on the *Frontier King's* gangplank, trundling scores of barrels, crates and cases up to the crowded freight deck.

The *Frontier King* was a two-stack river packet. Its curving wooden sides were scarred by wind and rain and sun, its splintered deckhouse and rails gouged by bullet and arrow holes.

Lifting gently in the turgid, heaving swells of the muddy Mississippi, the paddle-wheel steamer was the focal point of a veritable confusion of activity. The raucous sounds of a bawdy roustabout song, the creak of laden freight wagons, the picturesque swearing of brawny muleskinners lifted from the teeming waterfront and eddied back in long, flowing waves down St. Louis' crowded streets.

Great bales of coffee and cotton, barrels of flour and molasses and whiskey, stacks of buffalo hides filled the huge warehouses, cluttered the quays and loading platforms. Freight wagons churned through the ruts and emptied their merchandise along the wharf. A lumber barge drifted past in the swirling current and the strong-armed

Troopers raced to the stockade wall. Soldiers and Indians met hand to hand.

bargemen boomed their leather-lunged greetings to the idlers along the dock.

The streets were alive with a moving tide of people. Plainsmen rubbed shoulders with frock-coated gamblers, blue-clad cavalrymen and roughly clad trappers.

In the midst of that throng Jack Bundy hewed a wide path for himself, striding relentlessly toward the river. He was three inches over six feet and had the solid, compact weight to go with it, so his swinging shoulders knocked men out of the way. Their angry curses died on their lips when they saw the sweep of his wide-chested figure, the checkered shirt straining under bulging muscles. He was bareheaded and his thick mop of black hair made an unruly cowl above slate-gray eyes that were reckless and hard.

The old eagerness was building a fire in his blood. It was always that way whenever the time arrived for the *Frontier King* to leave on the long, hazardous journey up the Mississippi and Missouri to distant Fort Benton in the northern wilderness.

He had a deep, abiding pride in the steamer which he had owned for three years and which he had piloted through storms and Indian raids with a savage determination that characterized everything he did.

He was a thoroughly big and powerful

man. He had been reared on the frontier, and the wildness and ruggedness of this land had become a part of his nature. It was typical of him that, when every other river steamer was named after a woman or given some such title as *Missouri Queen,* he had fixed upon *Frontier King.*

Darting in front of a laboring team of bays hauling a loaded freight wagon, Bundy swung left out of the street and moved swiftly past a string of unpainted warehouses. Bearded stevedores, toiling at ropes and pulleys—hauled barrels of flour and molasses in great rope slings up to storage platforms.

Bundy picked his way around scattered cases and bales. His eyes never left the *Frontier King* or the swirling race of the river behind it.

A sudden shrill shout of warning behind him turned him half around. Then he was propelled forward by the thrust of hands, smacking his shoulders. Off-balance, his head craned instinctively upward. He had a fleeting, horrible glimpse of three barrels far above him.

One moment they were being drawn into space, firmly encompassed by the stout rope sling around their sides. Then there was a snapping sound. The barrels hurtled toward him.

He was already falling forward. He hit the ground and rolled frantically. His huge frame was unusually agile. A man screamed ten feet behind him. The ground shook to a tremendous, splintering impact.

A white shower of flour boiled into the air. The wind carried it across the waterfront in a drifting cloud. Great mounds of it fluttered down upon Bundy. He struggled up through that choking veil, gasping for breath. And all the while he heard the agonizing moaning of the man who had been trapped beneath the plummeting barrels.

Bundy wiped a checkered sleeve across his face and eyes. He beat at the flour which clung to his clothes. Men were yelling and shouting, moving toward the spot. He saw the smashed remains of the flour barrels. A little beyond them was the prone, writhing shape of the man who had saved Bundy while allowing himself to be trapped under their falling weight.

"Luke! Luke Grayling!" gasped Bundy, recognizing the victim as the chief engineer of the *Frontier King,* a loyal worker who had been with him since the first trip from St. Louis to Fort Benton. "So it was you who pushed me! Damn it, man, where are you hurt?"

Bundy's voice was rough with emotion. He could be hard as nails when the occasion demanded. But seeing Grayling struck down and lying so weak and helpless got under his skin.

"My legs, Jack," whispered Grayling weakly. He was a chunky, red-haired man, ruddy-cheeked and blue-eyed. But at the moment some of the natural color had drained out of his face. His yellowed teeth were on edge and he was fighting to hold onto consciousness. "My insides, too," he added weakly.

There was blood under Grayling's side. It made a sticky, scarlet pool in the flour and kept widening. His legs had a crushed, beaten look.

"Luke, why did you do it?"

"Was tryin' to—to catch up to you, Jack," gasped Grayling. "Then I saw that rope bust. Knew you—you'd be right under it—"

Grayling broke off. His lips trembled and his eyes fluttered, then closed. Plainsmen, roustabouts and trappers were crowding up close. Bundy got up from his crouch. His figure towered above these men. Then he lashed hot, furious words at them.

"Don't stand there and gape like fools! Lend me a hand, someone. We've got to get Grayling to Doc Harding's."

For just a brief instant the crowd was immobile. In that interval Bundy's eyes lifted to the loading platform of the warehouse. He saw a dark, watching figure suddenly wheel and disappear into the shadows. His eyes narrowed, then, passing along the stump of rope dangling in space and the skin pulled so tightly over his cheekbones that his expression looked distinctly gaunt.

THEN he bent down, got a firm but tender grip under Grayling's armpits. With two other men taking hold of the engineer's ankles, a dozen eager roustabouts cleared a path through the crowd.

Grayling was carried right into Doc Harding's office. At the medical man's direction they placed him on an improvised

operating table. One of the roustabouts blurted out the story. The doctor looked grim as he slashed at Grayling's matted, bloodied trousers with a pair of sharp shears.

"He's in bad shape," murmured Harding. "Compound fractures of both legs. Might even be worse than that if the bones are crushed, the nerve tissues torn away."

"Do what you can!" said Bundy. His voice was oddly soft, yet all the more dominant and penetrating. "I want you to bring him through. Charge everythin' to me. I'll be back."

Bundy whirled out of the room, leaving the medico staring after him in open-mouthed astonishment. Other men who had stepped up to the door backed away. There was something deadly and implacable in the granite cast of Bundy's features. He walked with a grim, unswerving purpose straight back to the waterfront.

He turned left at the line of warehouses. Most of them carried the name of Tracy McArdle as owner. Into one of these Bundy turned, shoulders moving restlessly, big hands balled into welt-knuckled fists.

In the uncertain gloom of the musty warehouse he collided with a man. The man cursed and lunged away. But Bundy whirled, leaped at the man, spun him around with an iron-hard grip on rounded shoulder.

"What's your rush, Ben Franck?" he demanded.

A rough, untamed face was lifted to his. Dark, close-spaced eyes glared malevolently at Bundy. The broad, flattened nose in the swarthy face flared outward.

"Keep your hands off me, Bundy!" Ben Franck warned.

"I want a word with you and you're goin' to listen," stated Bundy. Franck brushed Bundy's arm away and stood wide-legged and defiant. "You run a bunch of warehouses for McArdle. If I'm not mistaken you were up on the loadin' platform of this warehouse a few minutes ago when that rope sling busted."

A heavy frown pinched Franck's narrow forehead. He was a square, blunt man and his chin was too heavy for the rest of his face.

"Not me, Bundy," he retorted. "I was nowhere near that sling."

They were close to the door of the warehouse. A few curious men had tagged after Bundy. Now a bearded plainsman dressed in rough buckskins pushed in from the street.

"He's lyin', Bundy," the plainsman said. "I was out in the street when it happened. I tell you, this jigger and another gent were handlin' the sling."

Franck pivoted to face the plainsman. His cheeks turned red and swollen and dangerous.

"Keep your nose out of my business, friend, if you don't want a belly full of hot lead," Franck growled, and stabbed at the Navy Colt at his waist.

But Bundy moved in quickly. His own Navy pistol snaked out of the holster in a lightning blur of speed. The barrel jabbed Franck's middle.

"It's your belly that'll get the lead if you don't drop that pistol back in the holster," Bundy warned.

Bundy was four inches taller than Franck, but the latter made up for his lack of height in width and in heaviness of muscle. Now he regarded Bundy through red-rimmed, baleful eyes. He was primed for killing and his thick lips compressed in a tight line.

"You admittin' you were up on that loadin' platform?" Bundy persisted, his voice painfully even.

Some of the tension went out of Franck and he shrugged.

"What if I was up there?" he demanded. His grin tugged at his heavy underlip, put an ugly slackness to his mouth. "That was an accident when the sling busted."

Franck's voice was matter-of-fact. He was rough and unsentimental and wasn't sorry for anything.

"I'm not so sure it was an accident," snapped Bundy. There was cold savagery in his tone. "For two reasons. Because you were workin' the sling, and because this place belongs to McArdle." He jabbed the gun muzzle viciously into Franck's middle. "We'll have to look upstairs just to be sure. March!"

Fury put a shining gray brilliance in Franck's eyes. But he was helpless under the threat of Bundy's gun. Finally, he turned and tramped to a stairway along the side of the building. Bundy and the bearded plainsman followed.

They reached the upper story and

threaded their way around the litter of barrels and bales that were strewn about the floor. While the plainsman watched Franck, Bundy strode to the swinging end of rope that hung from the pulley wheel.

He frowned when he saw that the break was uneven. Franck saw the frown. A hard, amused laugh lifted from the depths of his chest.

"Well, Bundy, what do you find?" he taunted. "You were figgerin' somebody cut the rope with a knife and now you see you're wrong."

Bundy spun about, his eyes riveted upon the warehouse foreman with a ceaseless pressure.

"Maybe you were just smarter than I expected," he said. "You could have slashed or hacked the rope unevenly, leaving it weakened so it would break under strain when you were ready."

"You've got a helluva lot of gall sayin' that," growled Franck. "I'll see McArdle hears about this."

"Don't worry. I'll tell him myself." Bundy came up to Franck. He made a dominating figure. His strength and his powerful will flowed out of him, and it shook Franck's mocking indifference. "From now on I'll be watchin' you, Franck. I've got no proof, but I still think you had orders to kill me. Don't give me another excuse to kill you!"

II

LEAVING the warehouse, Jack Bundy went along the wharf until he came to the section where the *Frontier King* was tied up. Husky roustabouts were still stumbling and toiling up the sloping gangplank with their heavy loads. A few passengers, hours ahead of sailing time, lounged or walked about on the promenade deck.

Bundy was in a wicked humor. He brushed savagely against several stevedores when they didn't move fast enough to get out of his path. And his ill humor took a swift drop into hot rage when he came up the gangplank and almost collided with the man who had been occupying his thoughts.

Tracy McArdle was a dark-faced, dark-eyed individual. He was a match for Bundy in height and weight. But he carried the weight in a deceptive fashion and looked a good twenty pounds lighter. There was a smooth, refined look about him and he dressed in fancy pantaloons and waistcoat.

He was noted for his financial power and influence in St. Louis. He had an easy, affable manner, but his smile came too readily. Bundy was thinking that there was something evil and false behind that broad-lipped smile.

"That was a narrow escape you had, Bundy," greeted McArdle. "I saw it." His eyes were an indeterminate shade of gray. But as often as he smiled—and he was smiling now—the smile never reached those gray, fathomless eyes. "I'm sorry—"

"Sorry I wasn't killed?" snapped Bundy. There was no compromise in his manner and none in his voice.

McArdle remained unruffled. He continued to smile. Only his eyes showed a betraying change of temper.

"You're upset and you've reason to be," he said smoothly. "But it was an accident. It could have happened to anyone."

"Sure, but better if it happened to me, eh?"

"I don't follow you."

Bundy stiffened. His heavy brows drew together. Temper was churning up his insides.

"You're not foolin' anyone, McArdle," he stated angrily. "I found out this mornin' that you bought my note on the *Frontier King* from the Granger's Bank."

McArdle waved the news aside with a swing of his long arm.

"It's no secret. I saw a good chance to invest some cold cash."

Bundy was fast losing control. McArdle's smile kept mocking him. It got under his skin, left him no peace.

"A damned good investment," Bundy added savagely, "especially if I get killed and can't pay off. That leaves you with the packet, somethin' you've wanted for months."

"I admit I want the packet. I figger I could run the trips to Fort Benton more economically. I've got the capital to back me. I made you a fair offer once."

"Fair offer be damned. The *Frontier King* is worth twice what you wanted to pay." Bundy paused. His eyelids pinched closer together. When he spoke again his

voice had dropped a notch. "I'll tell you your trouble. You're greedy for power and money. You've dabbed your claws into everythin' that wasn't nailed down. You own the biggest commission business in St. Louis mainly because you froze out your competitors."

McArdle's heavy, muscular hand stroked his smoothly-shaven jaw. The hair-covered fingers of that strong hand came up past his lips to shield a portion of his continuous bland smile.

"That's good business, Bundy."

"Maybe it is. But when you stoop to attempted murder that's business of another color."

"You mean—?"

"I mean that was no accident when the rope sling haulin' up those barrels broke in front of your warehouse. I was slated to be the victim. Only Luke Grayling's quick move saved my bacon. He may die, or he may be crippled. I don't know. But I'm holdin' you fully responsible for his condition."

For the first time the smile left McArdle's features. The deep cleft in his chin became more pronounced as the skin tightened and stretched over the wide bones.

"If I were you, Bundy," he warned softly, "I wouldn't repeat that kind of talk around town. I'll break you in short order if you do."

"Like you've broken others? Like you've already tried to break me?" demanded Bundy harshly, his words driving at the big merchant unsparingly. "Have you forgotten the time I caught some of your paid hirelings throwin' sand in the packet's engines and you pretended you'd fired them long ago?"

McArdle's next move was as swift as it was unexpected. It caught Bundy totally unprepared. McArdle took a long stride forward and his left arm was swinging around in a vicious hooking blow in the midst of that stride.

The blow rammed into Bundy's short ribs, bringing Bundy's arms down in an instinctive motion. He never had a chance to avoid the short, jolting right-hand punch that crashed against the side of his jaw. He took two staggering steps backward. His legs seemed to be filled with shifting tides of sand.

They were rubbery and unsteady. The deck of the packet took a steep, upward slant. Sudden pain stabbed at Bundy's eyeballs. For a moment blackness swam in front of his vision.

He lost his balance, found himself skidding and rolling down the gangplank. The uneven puncheons jabbed into his spine with an acute torture. It pushed the blackness aside. He was rolling toward the edge with the Mississippi a brown, scummy expanse below him, when his fingers found a hold on a plank and halted his fall.

Somewhere along the wharf a man yelled. The cry was taken up by others. Boots pounded along the planking. But those were indistinct sounds to big Jack Bundy. He got up slowly. His siege of rockiness had passed. His head was clear.

He bent a little as he moved up the gangplank. He took his time. Not once during his talk with McArdle had he matched the merchant's smile. But now for the first time he did smile. But the gesture did nothing to soften his features. They remained rock-hard and implacable.

He had the taste of a fight in his mouth and he was enjoying it. The wildness of his nature welcomed violence. He approached McArdle with his broad shoulders hunched, his long arms swinging and his fists bunched. McArdle greeted him with a smile on the deck. Neither man was aware that the roustabouts had stopped their work, that a crowd was gathering along the wharf.

"You know, Bundy," said McArdle, "that felt good."

Bundy reached the deck and charged. McArdle shifted his weight to one side. Bundy's left slid past McArdle's neck, but the right cross that followed it hit him under the left ear and shook him up.

"So did that," gritted Bundy.

Then they lit into each other, two giants slugging away with both hands. The only sound was the vicious thudding of their fists against flesh and bone.

A JOLTING left drew blood from Bundy's nose. But Bundy opened a cut under McArdle's eye, then slammed in fast, his arms pumping blurs. He bulled right through a smother of blows, taking them with a savage and willful pleasure, just to land punches of his own.

He slid a left in under the heart, then

drove McArdle to the rail with two slashing rights. The second of these rights bent the merchant half over the rail. Before he could recover, an uppercut that started from the region of Bundy's knees lifted McArdle clear over the rail.

A gasp went up from the crowd. Bundy let out a *whoosh* of breath, his chest heaving from his exertions. McArdle made no outcry. His body hurtled down past the slanting gangplank and struck the muddy river with a great splash.

He surfaced almost immediately, gasping and blowing, and struck out for the wharf. Eager hands were ready to rescue him. Someone let down a length of rope. McArdle grabbed it and was hauled out.

A knot of seven or eight men gathered around the merchant. Among them was Ben Franck and others of McArdle's hardcase warehouse workers. They formed a tight wedge behind the dripping merchant as he glared up at Bundy and strode toward the gangplank.

Bundy felt a touch at his elbow. He turned slightly and grinned at Ed Pollett, his first mate, and the man in charge of all the deckhands.

"Looks like trouble, Jack," said Pollett. "Count on me for help."

"All right, Ed," Bundy grunted. "Keep your shirt on."

Pollett fingered his holstered gun with his right hand. His other hand stroked the haft of a keen-bladed knife in a leather scabbard at his belt. He was a chunky man, partly bald, wizened from long years spent in the out-of-doors. His skin was rough and wrinkled and his brown eyes had a dreary, washed-out look. A scraggly gray mustache, yellowing at its untidy edges, covered his long upper lip.

Bundy did not answer Pollett. His attention was riveted upon McArdle. Roustabouts hastened to get out of the merchant's path. Mud and dirty water soaked his fine pleated shirt, his gray pantaloons and fancy waistcoat.

"You look pretty, McArdle," Bundy told him.

McArdle's face was pale.

Behind the merchant Ben Franck was an ugly, preying force. "Just say the word, Tracy, and we'll blow Bundy wide open."

McArdle waved him back. "It's all right," he said. "I'll handle this."

He came up the gangplank and stopped in front of Bundy. Bundy lifted his fists, ready to continue the fight. But McArdle shook his head and smiled. This time Bundy noticed the smile came with distinct effort.

"Remember me this way, Bundy," he said slowly. He spoke calmly, but the heat of a tremendous consuming passion throbbed in the words. McArdle was not a man to take a beating easily, especially one in public. The curious eyes of the crowd rankled deeply within him, put steel in his glance. "You may never have another chance," he added. "I'd settle this right now by killin' you if I wasn't so set on gettin' to Fort Benton."

Bundy snorted, reluctant to let the fight drop. "Sure must be important business you've got up in Montana."

"Somethin's up," said Pollett hurriedly. "Biggest cargo on board he's ever shipped. Couple hundred barrels and crates."

"On the *King?*"

Pollett pointed to the crowded freight deck and back to the dock where other barrels and crates waited to be loaded on board.

"All McArdle's?" Bundy asked suspiciously.

"Yeah. And the freight charges have been paid," snapped McArdle. "So have the passenger fares for my associates here," he added, indicating Ben Franck and the burly group of men behind him.

Bundy's hand dropped to his gun. A sense of wariness came over him.

"If you're plannin' any booger play on the trip—"

"Hell, you're worse than an old woman," grunted McArdle. Some of the acid had gone out of his talk. "It's none of your business, but I'm goin' to open a couple of branches in the Idaho Settlements. That'll explain the extra men and the cargo."

His face turned serious and his voice grew impatient. "So you see it's very important that I reach Fort Benton. I wouldn't want anythin' to happen to you. After all, you are a crack river pilot. Once we get there I'll come lookin' for you with a gun. You follow me?"

"I get you," said Bundy eagerly, the violence within him straining to be unloosed. "Just you say the word."

III

AT four o'clock that afternoon, with all the cargo and passengers aboard, the gangplank was raised and the *Frontier King* eased away from the crowded St. Louis pier. Hands gripping the wheel, big Jack Bundy stared through the pilothouse windows at the muddy current of the Mississippi as he maneuvered skilfully toward the channel.

Men and women lined the waterfront. They shouted and waved to friends aboard the packet. A mail packet from New Orleans, tied up at another pier, whistled a departing greeting to the *Frontier King.*

The great paddle wheels moved ponderously, churning up a brown froth of water. Black smoke billowed from the packet's twin stacks. Deep in the bowels of the ship the laboring engines sent their muted and throbbing vibration up through the decks. Dry, weathered timbers creaked and groaned.

They were off on another perilous journey into the northern wilderness. Only time would tell if the next weeks would bring them to Fort Benton or to hell and disaster.

The waterfront dropped swiftly behind the *Frontier King.* The long line of warehouses dwindled into a grayish speck in the distance. Only isolated settlers' houses showed in occasional rifts along the shore as the packet picked up speed.

Bundy remained at the wheel for an hour before he called on a mate to spell him. Then he left the pilothouse, went down a steep companionway to the promenade deck. Passengers with their luggage littered the deck. Some greeted, but Bundy gave them only a curt nod, passing on down to the open freight deck.

In the shadows of the aft deck he saw a knot of six or seven strange deckhands. They were squatted around on sacks and and bales. They saw his attention and met it with a solid, unyielding scrutiny. Turning to call for Ed Pollett, Bundy found the mate at his side.

"Where did those new deckhands come from?" he demanded.

Pollett frowned, not liking what he had to say.

"Picked 'em up in a waterfront bar, Jack," he murmured. "Half the crew deserted."

"Deserted? Why?" The question came like the crack of a whip.

"I don't know," admitted Pollett grimly. His seamed face was altogether grave. "When they didn't show up near sailing time I made a round of the bars. Found some of 'em full of rotgut and not fit for work. Those that could talk said they were through."

Bundy's eyes grew dark and troubled. He shook his wide shoulders in a restless gesture.

"I don't like it," he said. "We never had trouble before. Something behind it." His teeth snapped together with an audible click. "I wonder how much McArdle knows about *this.*"

"Sorry, Jack. It was too late to do anythin' else."

"I'm not blamin' you. But we need this trip to pay off the note the bank was holdin' and which McArdle now owns. I don't want anythin' to go wrong. We've got enough to worry about with the rumor of the Sioux and Blackfeet on the rampage up north." Bundy pulled Pollett farther away and lowered his voice. "Watch those new men, Ed. If any of 'em act funny let me know."

Pollett nodded taciturnly and strolled toward the new hands. Bundy, after giving them all a stiff scrutiny, stalked to the nearest companionway and mounted to the Texas deck. He was about to continue upward to the pilothouse when his gaze was arrested by the solitary figure of a girl leaning over the rail.

Tough, bearded plainsmen and trappers eyed her covetously as they lounged on the deck, smoking and talking. But the girl seemed aloof and completely unaware of them. She had a slender, erect carriage and there was a proud, almost haughty tilt to her dark-haired head. A tight-bodiced blue dress that flowed out in voluminous folds around her small, slippered feet draped her shapely figure.

She was strangely out of place in the motley assortment of passengers. Yet there was no embarrassment, no uneasiness to be discerned in her manner. She was looking over the rail at the muddy, turgid sweep of the river, but she turned quickly as Bundy's boots scraped the worn deck planking behind her.

Her movements were lithe and swift.

Somehow that surprised Bundy. He removed his battered hat and managed an awkward smile. The face that was turned to his was one of singular beauty. It was a heart-shaped face, the skin white and smooth, the eyes an odd, deep gray-green under long curving lashes, the nose well-formed and delicate, the lips soft and red and cool.

The girl did not smile and she did not speak. But there was a curt, half-annoyed question in the sharp, appraising glance she fastened upon Bundy. He bowed uneasily, the presence of this girl oddly disturbing his senses.

"You're travelin' alone, ma'am?" he asked.

"Yes." The voice was low and melodious. Her eyes, without warmth, were provocative, the curve of her lips alluring. "Why do you ask?"

"It's not considered safe for a girl to ride these river packets without friends or relatives for company."

The girl's eyes remained cool and unfriendly. "I can take care of myself," she murmured curtly.

She flushed at Bundy's continued stare, yet she was not ill at ease. The pupils of her dark eyes were dilating. He was close enough to her to catch the subtle fragrance of her hair. It did something to him. His blood began to pound.

Bundy had never been a man to pay much attention to women. His rough and tumble existence, the hard fight to make a go of his river trading took all of his attention. Yet, suddenly he was conscious of a vague, nameless hunger—an emotional want that had been buried beneath the turbulent run of his active life. This girl, a total stranger, had done this, had stirred the deep hidden fires within him.

AND now it became very important that she should think well of him.

"Begging your pardon," he said. "You may be wondering why I have approached you. I'm Jack Bundy, captain and owner of this packet. The trip to Fort Benton is a long one—and it can be dangerous in more ways than one to a woman."

She eyed him scornfully.

"You're telling me nothing I don't know."

He tried again.

"Indians are rising in the north and we're carrying a tough complement of crew and passengers."

"So I've heard and seen." She remained calm and unruffled. "I'm going all the way and nothing you can say will make me turn back."

Bundy shrugged, his broad face uneasy. He was annoyed at the hot, alert stares of the men who were watching them.

"Just as you say, Miss—"

"The name is Nan Cooper."

"Not Captain Howard Cooper's wife?" blurted Bundy, a sudden sick sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Bundy wasn't sure if she diagnosed his reaction, but it seemed to him that she smiled. There was just a slight break in her expression, a brief relaxation of the red line of her lips.

"No. His sister," she said. "I'm going to Fort Benton to live at the post until he gets a furlough to come back to St. Louis." Her manner changed. She made an impatient, dismissing gesture. "If you don't mind, I've had enough questions."

"I'm sorry," responded Bundy quickly. "I'm interested in your safety. Now that I know you're Howie Cooper's sister, I mean to see that you are not bothered by any of the men on the boat."

"I believe I mentioned I can take care of myself."

"You did." A frown furrowed Bundy's brow. His eyes were grave and taciturn. "One man in particular I warn you against. Tracy McArdle."

Even as he mentioned McArdle's name, Bundy was conscious of eyes boring into him. At the end of the deck, looming big and solid and smooth, was McArdle. McArdle was watching Nan Cooper, his eyes bold and very intent.

Nan Cooper turned slowly, followed Bundy's eyes. Her attention came back to Bundy. She laughed briefly, her eyes faintly amused.

"I've heard he's a big man in St. Louis," she said. "Mr. Bundy, I think you'd better go back to your boat."

Bundy felt himself reddening. He steeled his muscles for a moment. Then he turned away and climbed to the pilothouse.

He took the wheel again, signaled the engine room for full speed ahead. . . .

WITH the exception of a few rain squalls the weather held good and the first days of the journey proved quiet and uneventful. They soon left the Mississippi and swung west into the Missouri. Brief stops were made at Kansas City, Leavenworth and Council Bluffs to disembark passengers and cargo, then the *Frontier King* plunged north through the sluggish current across the long rugged sweep of the Dakota plains.

They were deep in North Dakota, swinging gradually north and west toward the mouth of the Yellowstone River, before they sighted any Indians. There were small hunting bands who made no attempt to attack the packet. At instructions from Bundy, however, all crew members were armed with rifles, and passengers cleared from the open decks whenever redskins were in sight.

Intent on making fast time to Fort Benton, Bundy took to sailing at night whenever weather and moonlight permitted. He was well acquainted with all the vagaries of the changing Missouri and pushed on relentlessly, driven by a nameless feeling of uneasiness that grew with each passing day.

The voyage had been entirely without incident. The new deckhands had made no trouble. None of the scattered wood camps at which stops were made for fresh fuel had been ravaged by redskin attacks. Yet there were Indians in the neighborhood. They were seeing increasing signs of it. And for a full day after passing the Yellowstone the smoke of signal fires followed them behind the impenetrable green wall of the forests.

The very quiet and uneventfulness of the journey disturbed Bundy more than he cared to admit. It was like the hushed stillness, the feeling of breathless waiting, the sensation of suspended motion that precedes a typhoon or tornado.

But more than anything else, Bundy was bothered by Tracy McArdle. The *Frontier King* was two days and two nights out of Fort Benton and Bundy was at the wheel staring at the narrow ribbon of current in the uncertain light bannering down through fleecy clouds when the vision of McArdle rose up to plague him.

Far beneath him Bundy could hear the muted throb of the engines, the swing of voices from the promenade. But his attention was not on these things. Each day he had been expecting some spark to touch off an explosion that would set McArdle and himself at each other's throats.

But there had been no such spark. McArdle had maintained a discreet, almost haughty distance as if Bundy were too far below him in station to associate with. What was more astonishing was that McArdle stayed by himself. He was never seen with Ben Franck or any of the other hardcases he had admitted bringing with him.

Not once had McArdle exchanged a word with Bundy. Yet more than once, on his tours around the packet, Bundy had found McArdle or Franck and some of the others watching him with an edge of derision turning down their lip corners. It was as if they enjoyed some evil secret in which he could not share.

And lately, McArdle had gone out of the way to pass him on deck without speaking. At each meeting McArdle had been ready with a smile—a smile that was sly and forked and somehow wicked. The smile was just a thin shell hiding a core of malice and some deep-seated well of humorless mockery.

Then there was Nan Cooper. Bundy couldn't get the girl out of his mind. She was with him in all of his waking thoughts. Since that first day she had been more cordial. But there was no real warmth. Rather, there was only a slight unbending, a brief softening of the shell of reserve about her.

He hadn't undertaken to issue any further warnings to her until he noticed her walking around the deck with Tracy McArdle. Bundy could not deny that the big commission man made an imposing, good-looking figure. He spoke and dressed well and there was an air of well-fed, assured prosperity about him.

But Bundy couldn't forget that attempt on his life near the warehouses, nor the fact that McArdle now owned the note on the *Frontier King*. Although Bundy feared that the girl would resent his interference he felt responsible for her because of his friendship with Captain Cooper. It was the excuse he offered when he stopped the girl on the promenade deck one day.

"Hello," she greeted him. Her smile was friendly. It was like a gentle breeze rushing out of remote places, warming him. "I haven't seen you lately."

"I've been busy," he answered, more curt than he meant to be. He paused, not sure how to begin. "I notice you've been getting friendly with McArdle after I warned you."

"I don't see that it's any business of yours," she snapped.

"There are a few settlers' wives aboard."

"Yes. They stay by themselves."

He nodded soberly.

"There's a reason."

Anger darkened her eyes. Little spots of color appeared in her cheeks, enhancing her loveliness. "Don't tell me it's because of McArdle."

"I'm afraid it is," snapped Bundy soberly. The angle of his jaw became hard, more pronounced. "He's not a man to trust."

Her eyes darkened.

"You've said that before. I hope you have reasons."

Bundy nodded, reluctant to go on. Finally, he told her about the accident at the wharf, the ridiculous offers McArdle had made to buy the packet, the trouble with the crew.

"So you think he tried to have you killed?" she asked. Her eyes seemed to mock him.

"I'm sure of it."

"But you have no proof." Her eyebrows lifted archly. "Somehow I find him very courteous, a perfect gentleman."

"He's all of that when he wants to be." She smiled now, but Bundy's thoughts and impressions were too grave to permit any lightening of his rugged features. "I don't like his presence on the boat and I won't feel safe until we reach Fort Benton."

Bundy looked up as Nan waved gaily to someone behind him. He whirled, saw McArdle approaching. McArdle smiled at Nan. His eyes, when they slid around to Bundy, were secretive and dryly amused.

"Oh, I forgot, Mr. Bundy," said Nan. "I promised Mr McArdle I'd take a few turns around the deck with him."

Bundy bowed stiffly and stalked off. He heard McArdle's laughter, booming resonantly behind him. It made his shoulders twitch.

HE was angry, with himself for bringing the subject of McArdle up again, and angry, too, because he couldn't get this girl out of his blood.

If he had turned around he would have found her watching him. At the moment there was no amusement in her eyes, only a strange brilliance that might have been warmth and tenderness. And he had no way of knowing how his own presence, his strong, rugged face, his powerful, well-proportioned body, the turbulent spirit so evident in everything he said and did—affected Nan Cooper.

When she was with him she was filled with a wildness, an abandon that she hadn't known existed within her. It was as if some headlong and kindred spirit linked them together. Yet, because she was a strong and willful girl, and had a sharp sense of pride, she insisted upon freezing out all the disturbing sensations that sought to sway her emotions.

But Bundy knew nothing of Nan Cooper's innermost feelings. All he did know was that her presence on the packet colored every waking thought. There was never a moment during the endless, solitary hours of day or night when he stood at the wheel of the *Frontier King,* watching the wooded wilderness shores sweep past, that he didn't carry a vivid picture of Nan in his memory.

Even now, alone in the pilothouse, guiding the throbbing packet around treacherous shoals and half-hidden sandbars, Bundy was warmed by the vision of Nan Cooper's gray-green mysterious eyes, by the gentle curve of her fair-skinned cheek, by the red lips, mobile and lovely, by the memory of her softly modulated voice and the graceful movements of her body.

The powerful beat of the engines sent their labored tremor up through the creaking packet. Night's shadows lay dark and thick over the pilothouse. Eyes riveted upon the curve of the river ahead of him, Bundy was only half conscious of a scuffing noise behind him.

It was repeated, this time nearer. Bundy whirled around, broad shoulders pressing against the wheel as Tracy McArdle, Ben Franck and a third man barged into the pilothouse. All three were armed with Navy pistols pointed at Bundy's chest.

Recklessly, he jerked to one side. His

right hand plunged toward his gun-belt.

"You'll be a fool—and a dead one at that—if you pull that pistol," McArdle told him bluntly.

The three men came on steadily across the room. Their features were hard and brutal in the flickering lamplight. Bundy licked lips that had gone suddenly dry. He was wildly angry, but at the same time a sensation of appalling horror—horror induced by fear for the packet and its passengers—gripped him.

"What in hell do you mean by comin' up here, McArdle?" Bundy demanded, his voice sounding hollow. "Get out before I—"

"Before you what?" sneered Ben Franck. "You don't look so big to me now, Bundy."

McArdle laughed good-humoredly. "We're takin' over the packet," he said.

Bundy's furious retort was cut off by sounds of confusion coming from other sections of the *Frontier King*. Pistol shots drilled into the night. Men yelled and shouted in berserk frenzy. Boots stamped up and down companionways. The engines ceased their steady throbbing. The packet began to drift in midstream.

"That'll be the rest of my men swingin' into action," added McArdle, a deep chuckling sound issuing from his throat. He gestured to Ben Franck. "Get his gun, Ben."

Franck nodded and stalked over to the wheel. Bundy stood braced near the spokes. His eyes blazed out of a haggard, ravaged face. The sound of fighting below him, the shrill cries of men in pain and agony told its own bleak, sordid story to him. He was listening to the *Frontier King* being turned into a shambles so that renegades could take over. The thought nearly drove him mad. It was something too big, too monstrous to endure.

He was frantic and desperate. They were backing him to the wall. And he was a man who would not be pressed, who would not be cornered. Change came over him, stiffened his cheeks. Ben Franck edged cautiously around him. A groping hand removed the Navy Colt from Bundy's holster.

FRANCK slid to one side. McArdle relaxed a trifle. His lips expanded. Franck snorted in derision. His body twisted to one side and he turned half-away from Bundy. Bundy chose that moment to launch his six feet, three inches of solid bone and muscle at Franck.

The gunman fired instinctively. Gun-thunder rocked the pilothouse. A bullet grazed a fiery track along Bundy's ribs. But he was far from caring about that. He hit Franck with his shoulders, wrestled him to the floor. Exploring fingers wrenched Franck's spare gun out of his left-hand scabbard.

Bundy released Franck, rolled swiftly away. The man beside McArdle was firing crazily and not hitting anything. Bundy tilted up the gun muzzle and squeezed off a shot. The gunman folded at the hips and fell forward. His angling body struck McArdle, knocked him aside as Bundy fired into the empty space where the merchant had been.

"Ben! Ben! Slug him, but don't shoot!" yelled McArdle.

Bundy twisted around to face Franck lunging in at him and got the full force of a gun butt on his forehead right between the eyes. The blow dazed him, flung him on his face. Franck pounced on him. A boot clamped down on Bundy's wrist. He let go of the Colt. Then he was hauled roughly to his feet by McArdle and Franck.

The uproar along the lower decks was subsiding, though an occasional gunshot still ripped the night.

"The packet!" blurted Bundy thickly. "We're headin' for shore!"

McArdle leaped to the wheel, spun the spoke. The paddle wheeler lurched drunkenly, veered back toward the channel.

There was a commotion on the companionway leading to the pilothouse. Nan Cooper, her long dark hair flying about her head, her face full of color and a fierce animation in every lithe line of her, stumbled into the room.

"Jack! Jack!" she gasped. "They're taking over the packet—renegades—"

She stopped on a choked whisper as her widening eyes fastened upon the grim tableau within the pilothouse. Even while Bundy felt a hot surge of blood go through him at the sight of her and because she had called him "Jack," he saw her arm lift menacingly toward Ben Franck.

"Look out, Nan!" yelled Bundy.

But the small derringer in her fist arced upward. Franck was lunging at her. There was a flat explosion, a sinuous tongue of flame. Then Franck was charging on, unhit. He knocked the derringer out of Nan's fist. With his free hand he slammed her against the wall.

"Damn you, Franck!" roared Bundy. "Keep your hands off her."

Bundy started forward recklessly, his eyes wild and red-rimmed. But McArdle stepped in fast, blocked him with a drawn, cocked gun.

"Stay back!" McArdle warned, his grin gone, his eyes like shining balls of steel. "Unless you want a gun barrel bent over your skull!"

Bundy stopped. His face was suddenly drawn and haggard. Nan was leaning weakly against the wall. Her cheeks were unnaturally white. The back of her hand was pressed to her mouth. When it came away, her arm trembled and Bundy saw that there was blood on her lower lip.

"Franck, I'll kill you for that!" Bundy said savagely. His eyes narrowed until the wrinkles around their edges became long, down-tracking furrows across his browned skin. He looked over at Nan and his expression softened. "Nan, you're hurt."

"No—Jack," she murmured as if she were not sure of her voice. "I'm all right."

"You shouldn't have come up here."

Her look was eloquent.

"I had to. When I saw what was happening below I—I wanted to warn you. I—I thought—"

Nan didn't finish what she was going to say. But the look in her eyes was enough to tell Bundy that she had been worried about him. At this moment when they both faced unknown peril, Bundy found Nan immeasurably lovely. There was magic on her bruised lips and something new and tremulous in her eyes—a softness, a tenderness meant just for him.

"You—were right," she added. "I—I mean about McArdle."

McArdle chuckled, his eyes raking her trembling figure.

"Bundy tellin' you things about me?"

"Yes," she answered defiantly. "He told me you were a trouble-maker, that he was sure you had ordered him killed and that you were trying to break him. I was a fool for not believing him. You're everything he said you were and worse."

A flurry of yells followed by the pounding of feet along the companionway jerked everyone around.

ED POLLETT, bleeding from a cut on his neck, his scraggly hair standing on end, stumbled into the room. When he saw Bundy disarmed, he drew a knife. But there were two men coming up the companionway behind him. He whirled to meet them.

At a signal from McArdle Ben Franck moved across the room and knocked Pollett down with a sledgelike blow of his fist. Before Pollett could recover Franck had snatched his knife. Pollett swore. His eyes burned eerily in a face gone pasty white.

"Jack, the skunks have taken the boat."

"I know," said Bundy, growling under his breath. He did not take defeat easily. There was a dull, persistent ache in his head and his eyes seemed to be jumping in their sockets. But he didn't mind the pain half so much as he minded losing the *Frontier King* to McArdle's renegades, and the danger in which Nan was placed. "They've got us in a tight," he admitted.

"I was on the freight deck," said Pollett, the words spilling from him in a headlong torrent, "when a bunch of masked hombres armed wth guns cut loose and said they were takin' over. I tried to round up the crew, but I could only find half of 'em. Then I realized those new hands were renegades workin' with McArdle's hired roustabouts."

Jack Bundy's cheeks were like hardened wedges of concrete. His eyes drilled angrily into McArdle's beefy face. All of his sensations were reduced to one violent and primitive desire for revenge.

McArdle gauged Bundy's rising temper and took a keen enjoyment in it.

"An amusing situation, don't you think?" he asked. "And one that will bring great profit to my enterprises."

"If I ever get out of this alive, McArdle, I'll settle with you—if I have to follow you all the way to hell and back again."

"Just make it hell," said Franck with an evil laugh. "You'll get there quick enough, and you won't be comin' back."

Bundy's mouth flattened out. His voice was deadly. "You're on my list, Ben—my killin' list."

Ed Pollett, who had just noticed Nan Cooper, now blurted a worried question to McArdle.

"What're you goin' to do with the girl?"

McArdle considered that a moment. He took his time and he did not seem conscious of Nan's cold, scornful stare. He was looking at her as if she already belonged to him.

"I've been thinkin' about that," he said for Bundy's benefit, then turned his attention to Nan while the other two renegades who had chased Pollett crowded more closely. "I've taken a fancy to you, Nan. Reckon you know that—just as you know that I'm a big man in St. Louis. After this enterprise I'll be still bigger. Before I'm through I'll be a real power in the West.

"You and me could go places together. I'd make you Queen of the West. It's a chance not every girl would have. Why, I reckon if you insisted, I'd even marry you." He laughed. "Of course, you'd have to keep quiet about little things like you're seein' tonight. But as my wife—"

"Save your breath," broke in Nan sharply. Here eyes were hot and her voice seemed to burn into the big commission man. "I'd rather die before I had anything to do with you. In fact, if I had a gun I'd kill you myself."

"Well spoken, gal!" blurted Pollett.

McArdle stiffened as if he had been struck across the face. He had a certain amount of vanity, a definite pride and assurance, and the contempt he saw in the girl's eyes goaded him deeply.

"Suit yourself," he said. The words were unsteady—made so by his conscious effort to regain his control. "There are women and women. You've had your choice. Maybe it's just as well. I may have a better use for you."

"What are you gettin' at?" demanded Bundy. The stir of admiration he'd experienced at Nan's display of courageous defiance disappeared in a new rush of fury. "You do what you want, but keep Nan out of this."

Bundy's muscles were braced for a rush. He was on the near edge of rashness and he was ready to charge McArdle's leveled gun. Nan saw the thin, precarious tether that held his temper and stepped in front of him.

"Don't, Jack—they'll kill you," she pleaded.

She spoke in a tight, little breath. The look in her eyes was searching and shy and eager.

McArdle saw that look and scowled. His eyes narrowed with a malicious glint lighting up their muddy depths.

"You'll be wantin' to know my plans, Bundy," he said slowly. "For the rest of the night we'll keep on sailing to keep a date with some friends of mine upriver. You'll be at the wheel."

Bundy stood solid and compelling and challenging.

"Like hell I will," he snapped. "I'll run the packet aground before I take any orders from you."

McArdle glanced from Bundy to Nan. The long, wicked grin began to tug at his colorless lips.

"I think you'll listen to reason," he murmured softly. The gun was rock-steady in his fist. "There's no man knows the Missouri better than you, so I want you at the wheel. It's either that or I'll set the girl ashore by herself."

"You wouldn't dare!" broke in Ed Pollett with a bellow of muffled rage.

Jack Bundy's restraint broke. His big hands bunched. His heavy, muscular arms bent at the elbows. He started forward.

"You devil," he said between lips that barely moved, "we'll settle this right now."

He was walking into death and didn't care. He had passed his own margin of safety. All that was left was a fierce and headlong urge for destructive action.

"You'll be walkin' right into a bullet, Bundy," McArdle reminded tensely. There was a brittle, uneasy quality to the close air of the pilothouse. McArdle's hand was whitening around the Navy Colt. "You're big, but not too big to stop a bullet." Bundy kept on coming. He was just five paces away, ready to lunge at McArdle, when the commission man added: "If you die nothin' can save Nan Cooper. Remember that."

That stopped Bundy. He halted, swaying forward, fighting down the unruly impulses that roared through him.

McARDLE talked on, pressing home his point with a brutal and calculated intentness.

"I don't need to remind you that a girl wouldn't have much chance wanderin' on foot in this wilderness. No food, no water. No gun. The lonely nights. And then there're the Indians."

The resonant tones beat against Bundy. They drove a wedge into his heart. A haunted, frustrated look came into his eyes.

"All right," he said huskily.

"No, Jack. Don't do it," pleaded Nan Cooper. She came away from the wall. Weariness and pain and fear flowed across her mobile features, but the fierce high courage of pioneers was in her blood. It turned her stubbornly defiant. "Let them set me ashore. Let them kill us both. Whatever plan they have can only bring disaster to all of us on the packet."

"There's no other way," Bundy told her flatly.

He hoped she understood. He looked at McArdle and Franck. There was no mercy for Nan or himself in their eyes. Their destiny was clear and irrevocable. They knew too much to be permitted to live after reaching Fort Benton.

Yet nothing could have made Bundy thrust Nan into any greater personal peril. For the time being he'd have to string along—until he found a chance to fight back, until their vigilance relaxed. He could rush McArdle's gun now. But that would be suicide. And, dead, he could not help her.

"You're top dog, McArdle," Bundy stated grimly. "But if you're thinkin' of returnin' to St. Louis after this you're a fool. Word'll get back. You'll be branded for life."

"Word will get back, Bundy," admitted McArdle, "but my name won't be connected with this raid. By now, all the passengers are under guard in the main lounge. In a little while masked renegades will herd me through the lounge, for all to see, into a private cabin. Everyone will think I'm a prisoner, too. The girl and Pollett will be locked in separate staterooms so they don't talk. And in the mornin' there'll be a surprise for everyone."

"If you're plannin' a double-cross—if anythin' happens to Nan—" Bundy began, his face darkening.

But McArdle wasn't paying any attention. He gestured to one gunman to move Pollett and Nan out of the pilothouse. Then he spoke quietly to Franck. The dead outlaw was taken away. After McArdle went off, Bundy was left with Franck and one other armed roustabout.

Fifteen minutes later, his shallow wounds crudely bandaged, Bundy heard the muted throb of the engines again. The packet trembled, gained momentum, its broad prow pushing through the muddy river current. Bundy stood at the wheel. At his back lingered Franck and the other outlaw, guns in hand, ready to shoot him down on the slightest provocation.

IV

ALL that night the *Frontier King* shoved its broad prow westward across the Montana wilderness. The engines were at half-speed, but progress was steady. More than once Jack Bundy was tempted to run the packet aground on one of the sandbars knifing into the river from the brush-covered shore.

But Franck and the other gunman hovered near him, eternally vigilant, watching for any false move on his part. Bundy was trapped, and the knowledge was a bitter pill for him to swallow. For a time he forced himself to endure the galling trial of his captivity. But very soon the tempest of wrath seething inside of him would boil over into an uncontrollable flood. When that time came he wanted to be near McArdle because he was resolved to have his go at the big commission man no matter what the risk, no matter how certain death for himself might be.

Dawn came swiftly. A mist rose from the river. It was like white steam from a shooting geyser. It obscured Bundy's vision, trembled in the air, flowed in around him with damp, curling fingers. He was suddenly reminded of McArdle's surprise. McArdle had mentioned enough to lead Bundy to expect that this entire coup had been carefully planned and that reinforcements for some other bit of deviltry waited somewhere ahead upriver.

Bundy had his answer three hours after dawn when one of the lonely, isolated wood camps came into view around a bend in the river. McArdle came into the pilot-

house and greeted Bundy with a sly smile.

"Signal the engine room for quarter speed, Bundy," he said. "We'll be pickin' up wood here—and some friends of mine."

Bundy jerked up his head. His voice was a gusty breath of haggard suspicion.

"Injuns!" he exclaimed.

"A good guess," admitted McArdle. "But you haven't seen all."

McArdle and Franck approached with drawn guns. Bundy was ordered to give full attention to his piloting. The packet drew slowly in toward shore, rubbed up against a crude landing pier. Masked roustabouts let the gangplank down.

There was a moment of delay, a high babble of angry, aroused voices. Then a motley tide of men and two or three women stumbled down the gangplank. Armed outlaws guarded the decks, supervised the exodus to the wooded shore.

A chill wind of dread blew up and down Bundy's spine. "What devil's scheme are you workin' now?" he growled.

He turned away from the sight, shut his ears to the hoarse pleadings of the passengers, to the brutal, goading shouts of the outlaws.

"Won't hurt to tell you, I reckon," said McArdle, after an interval of feigned weighty consideration. "First, you might as well know that you were right about that accident on the St. Louis wharf."

"I knew it!" gritted Bundy, his mouth set and grim. "And you crippled Luke Grayling. You'll pay for that.'

McArdle went on as if he had not heard. "As it happened, it was best you didn't die then. Although I would have taken over the packet I'd have had to hunt high and low for a decent river pilot. This way, I can use you till this little job is finished. As you may also have guessed, I hired men to get part of your regular crew drunk before sailing time so Pollett would have to hire men in my pay."

"Where are you sendin' those passengers?" demanded Bundy, ignoring all other considerations.

"Ashore—for good. They can have their choice of walkin' on to Fort Benton or back to St. Louis."

For a moment Bundy said nothing. He swung to the pilothouse window, glanced down at the straggling line of plainsmen, trappers and settlers. All of them were unarmed. They made a desolate group, their shoulders bowed in forlorn dejection.

"Without food or weapons?" Bundy asked.

'Yeah."

"You bloody devil!" Fury was prodding Bundy's nerves again. "Fort Benton is six days from here on foot. They'll starve. Even with guns they wouldn't have a chance against the redskins."

"Tough, ain't it?" sneered Ben Franck.

A sudden, new terror struck into Bundy. He whirled back to the pilothouse window, peered down to the shore until his eyes burned with a horrible frenzy. He swung back to McArdle, his voice hoarse.

"Where's Nan? What have you done with her?"

"She's on board," said McArdle. "She'll stay on board. I made a bargain with you."

Something sly and wicked danced in McArdle's dark eyes. It put a block of ice in Bundy's chest. His breathing became labored and strained. He suspected some further treachery—treachery that meant danger for Nan.

THERE was a wild whooping in the forest. A band of painted savages, carrying rifles, tomahawks and lances, charged out of the trees. They sprinted wildly down to the shore. They were greeted by grinning roustabouts.

"Pardon me," said McArdle, "while I greet my friends."

He moved out of the pilothouse. Bundy watched him go down and palaver with a tall Indian whose body was daubed with streaks of vermilion paint. There was a commotion near the gangplank. Then two roustabouts led a protesting, fighting, scratching Nan Cooper to the shore. McArdle and the Indian chief exchanged brief words. The Indian glanced boldly at Nan, then made a grimace that was meant for a grin.

"What the hell's goin' on down there?" roared Bundy. He had his back to the pilothouse windows now and faced Franck and the other gunman. "That dirty skunk—"

"Nothin' much," said Franck, his face ugly in unholy glee. "Just a last-minute idea of McArdle's. The chief has been hankerin' for a white squaw. McArdle

figgered he could drive a good bargain with him for the girl in return for some prime furs."

Bundy's mouth twisted around a bitter oath. The veins in his neck swelled. Franck's grin was an insidious torment, goading him. He started forward, then halted as McArdle returned. Outside, he could hear the harsh clamor as yelling savages stormed aboard the packet.

"Things are goin' well, friend Bundy," he said in high good humor. "The chief likes the girl."

Bundy lost control, then. He lunged forward in a low, diving tackle. He struck McArdle's knees, bore him to the floor. His fists slashed out wildly. Then Franck and the other men jumped on top of him. A gun barrel slammed against his head. The strength drained out of him.

He was dragged to his feet. They flung him up against the wheel where he clung dazedly for support. He was beaten, whipped, but his eyes remained hard and implacable, staring through a reddish mist of pain at his captors.

"Better kill me now," he grated, 'because I'll tear you apart with my hands if I get the chance." His voice rose. "I'll kill Nan myself before I'll see her sold to Indians."

"You're through," mocked McArdle. "Nothin' can stop me now. Three hundred redskins are aboard—enough for my plans. You know half of those barrels and crates on the freight deck are filled with sand and rocks. I've got a slick plan. It involves emptying those barrels to let the Injuns hide inside. When we reach Fort Benton and cart the cargo assigned to the military garrison inside the stockade, we'll be in a swell spot to take over the entire fort.

"The soldiers won't have a chance—with Indians inside and outside the stockade. The redskins will have a picnic, collectin' scalps and firearms and ammunition. I'll be a 'prisoner' aboard the packet with some of my picked men. And if we managed to get away from some of the 'renegades' who aided the Indians and take the packet back to St. Louis, we'll be regarded as lucky heroes. As for the river captain, Jack Bundy, he'll be among the missing."

Tracy McArdle ended on a high note of harsh amusement. There was poison in the man. It seeped into his ruthless talk, put a merciless shine in his eyes.

Terrible, fighting impulses hammered at Bundy's brain. He ached with the desire to throw himself upon the grinning merchant.

"And what are you gettin' out of all this?" he asked slowly.

"Besides the *Frontier King* and all the river business, I'll be collectin' a half million dollars' worth of furs from the Indians in return for lettin' 'em sack Fort Benton. I tell you, Bundy, I'll wind up ownin' all of St. Louis."

"If you live long enough," intoned Bundy savagely.

Ben Franck sneered. The black hairs on his coarse cheeks stood out like a myriad tiny needles.

"Look who's talkin'," he said. "From now on you can start countin' your time in hours instead of days and weeks."

Bundy scowled, holding himself rigidly in check. The implication in Franck's words was quite plain. They would let him live until they reached Fort Benton. After that, with his usefulness ended, they would kill him and throw him in the river.

Neither McArdle nor Franck was capable of mercy. They were hard and ambitious and thoroughly brutal. They were the kind of men who would let nothing stand in their way. If they could set fifty passengers afoot in the wilderness, leaving them to a hopeless fate of starvation or death at the hands of Indians, the life of one more man would not matter at all.

It was a closed issue and the knowledge was thoroughly disturbing. Something went over Bundy's face like a shadow. He felt the bitter, relentless tugging of despair. It was like a powerful vise clamped around his heart, squeezing the life out of him.

"Well, what have you got to say, big man?" taunted Franck.

The question was a cruel spur, digging into Bundy's senses. But again he fought the up-surge of temper. It would be suicide to buck McArdle and Franck now.

Though it was a hard thing for him to do, he resolved grimly to string along and wait for a favorable opportunity to fight back. He wasn't giving up the *Frontier King*, and all the hard years of toil behind him during which he had built up a profitable river trade, to a bunch of killers. But

neither was he rushing blindly into disaster.

"You're a mangy pack of buzzards," he growled angrily because he knew some such outburst was expected of him. "But I ain't finished yet. Just remember that. I'll live to kill you both."

Franck's gun-hand whitened. Murder lust blazed from his eyes.

'What do you say, Tracy? Shall I fill him with lead?"

McArdle chortled good-naturedly. "Don't be in a hurry. He's your meat when we get to Fort Benton."

Nothing more was said after that. Under heavy guard, Bundy watched the roustabouts finish loading wood on board the packet. Then the gangplank was drawn up. A bell clanged in the engine room. The paddle wheels churned up a muddy froth and the boat slid out toward midstream with Bundy once more at the wheel. And back on the wooded shore remained fifty men and women doomed to an uncertain but cruel fate.

THE sight of those weary, terrified faces—pale and wasted and utterly devoid of hope—lingered with Big Jack Bundy during the next two days. The memory was a canker that festered within him, spreading its corrosive flux all through his system.

He carried that memory on into the second night. A night that was cloudy and windy and filled with an impending sense of doom. Dawn would find them at Fort Benton. It was tonight or never. Tonight he had to make his break. Tonight he would live or die. And on his actions might hang the lives of his loyal crew, now locked in the promenade lounge, as well as the passengers back at the wood camp.

Bundy was aware that he could expect no help from Pollett or any of the crew. This was his fight and his alone.

Instinctively his big hands gripped the wheel harder. He peered out through the pilothouse glass at the wooded Montana shores, at the dim, winding strip of the Missouri knifing into the gloom ahead. He felt the muted throb of the engines beneath him. The churning paddle wheels set up a faint splashing sound in the rear.

Ben Franck and Tracy McArdle were on guard. They were watching him with a never-ceasing vigilance. Suddenly Bundy's mouth clamped down in a hard wedge, and he swung the wheel hard over to the right.

The packet lurched, veered sharply toward shore. McArdle and Bundy yelled fiercely. Franck was pitched off his feet. He landed on his face, dropped his gun and scrambled for it. McArdle grabbed a sliding table, held on a moment and came forward.

"What the hell are you doin', Bundy?" he growled.

"I'm wreckin' the packet!" stormed Bundy, a fierce exultation ringing like a bell in his voice.

"Swing 'er back to midstream!" warned McArdle, "or I'll kill you."

"Shoot and be damned!" gritted Bundy and kept the *Frontier King* on a tangent, veering obliquely from the channel. Trees and brush rushed up out of the night, loomed in front of the ship. "I'll ram 'er straight into the woods."

Franck got to his feet and rushed up to McArdle's side. They were within a yard of Bundy and reaching frantically for the wheel, when Bundy swung the wheel back in the other direction. Again the packet lurched and bucked. It heeled far to one side, slanted away from the shore with a dreadful, rocking motion.

Franck's feet slid out from under him. He fired twice as he fell. The bullets smashed a window in front of Bundy. McArdle teetered crazily, fighting for his balance. His gun bucked and roared. A sliver of red flame washed past Bundy's face.

He heard a bell clang in the engine room, felt the packet lose speed as the engines were thrown into reverse. Then McArdle was falling toward him. Bundy spun away from the wheel. He measured McArdle swiftly. His right arm came up savagely and surely. A jolting uppercut exploded on McArdle's chin and he went on down to the tilted floor.

Bundy whirled and raced for the door. Behind him he heard Ben Franck cursing. A gun exploded. Hot lead droned past his head. Then Bundy was out on the open companionway, rattling down the stairs to the upper deck. Dark, uncertain shapes were running below him, racing for dim, spidery companionways. Franck was shouting and roaring.

"Martin! Bells! Bundy is loose! Cut him down!"

Bundy hit the deck. A man came out of the shadows, grappled with Bundy. Bundy drove an elbow into the man's neck, slammed a fast one-two into the jaw. The man dropped like a weighted sack. But other men were coming forward.

Bundy ran to the rail, put a palm on the worn wood and lifted himself off the deck. His body vaulted into empty space, dropped toward the muddy blackness of the river.

V

THE weight of Bundy's body carried him in a deep, dizzy plunge into the swirling, silt-filled Missouri. Water tore at his lungs. Pressure drummed at his ears. He kicked out his legs, clawed toward the surface. He came up into darkness and a confusion of shouting voices calling from the decks of the *Frontier King*.

Guns were bellowing into the night. The gloom was cut and laced by meshing streams of lead. Bullets angled into the river with a pelting splash that was like a light summer rain.

Bundy was caught in the churning wake of the paddles. A twist of current shot him down deeply. Then he fought upward again to find the paddles stilled as the packet stopped. He swam with a powerful breast stroke toward the packet. They were still shooting at him. In desperation, he decided to risk a wild ruse.

After a volley of shots he cried out sharply as in pain. He thrashed the water, then dived deeply.

"We got him!" shouted Franck exultantly.

More bullets sprayed the spot where Bundy had been. He swam under water until he thought his lungs would burst. Then he broke clear, close in against the side of the packet.

Franck and some of the renegades had lit lanterns. They were holding them over the side. An eerie, unreal brilliance lit up the muddy water. Bundy caught a glimpse of dark figures, feathered scalplocks as Indians peered overside. Then he went under again. When he came up he heard Franck mutter to someone else.

"He's done. He didn't come up!"

"Maybe he's playin' possum," the man answered dubiously.

Franck snorted. Bundy held his breath and waited. He swept his long hair out of his eyes. Gradually the lanterns were blown out. Bundy paddled noiselessly along the side of the packet until his groping hand found a trailing rope end. He held on to that while he heard McArdle's voice yell for all hands to get back on deck.

A bell clanged in the engine room. The paddle wheels began to churn. Slowly the *Frontier King* slid away through the current. Bundy guessed McArdle was at the wheel. Not knowing the channel, McArdle was proceeding at greatly reduced speed.

Bundy hung on, letting himself be dragged through the muddy stream. It wasn't a pleasant experience, but it had to be endured. He was thankful the speed was not great and that the river was calm or he would have been drowned despite his efforts to stay afloat.

For more than an hour he remained at the end of the rope, waiting until the sound of men's voices died away on the packet. Gradually silence came to the ship. Indians and white men alike were asleep. Bundy guessed that a couple of guards on the lower deck and McArdle and Franck were about the only men stirring.

At last, Bundy braced himself, called upon his tiring muscles to lift himself in a hand-over-hand climb up the rope. He was winded and his arms were trembling when he reached the deck and climbed over the rail.

A man strode out of the shadows toward him. Bundy moved silently and with deadly intent. He was upon the guard before the latter could move to defend himself. Bundy drove a shoulder into the man's chest, shot a murderous right to the guard's chin. The man collapsed with a dull moan. Bundy let the man slip to the deck. Quickly he appropriated his gun and knife.

Heart hammering wildly beneath his ribs, nerves keened to detect the slightest warning movement, Bundy walked aft. He reached a dark companionway, went down it in stealthy silence.

The freight deck was littered with barrels and crates and the sleeping forms of Indians. The reek of their oily, sweating bodies smote Bundy's nostrils. He waited

behind a supporting stanchion, studying those quiet, half-naked bodies.

In just a few hours dawn would be breaking and they'd be piling into barrels and crates, preparing for the unholy slaughter at Fort Benton. Bundy was one man against the entire bloodthirsty horde. The thought was like wine in his veins. He was ready for them, eager for a fight. If he could escape detection until dawn there was still a chance—a slim one at that—of saving the garrison.

Every nerve screaming with tension, Bundy moved forward. It seemed that each board was alive with creaks. But finally he reached a line of empty barrels far against the port side of the packet. He was grinning when he climbed into the first empty barrel he found and squatted down to keep his lonely vigil—with life or death . . .

Shadowy darkness still lingered in the crowded freight deck when shouts all over the packet warned that they were approaching the wilderness fort. Bundy heard McArdle shouting orders to Franck.

"This job is in your hands, Ben!" he was booming. "Rig yourself out as an Injun and hop in one of those barrels. When most of the cargo consigned to the garrison is inside the fort, sound the alarm and attack those soldiers."

There was a wild scurrying of feet along the decks. Indians rose from their slumber, began to climb into barrels and crates. Bundy felt his mouth go dry while he wondered if some savage would select his hiding place.

He was thankful that darkness still lingered in the depths of the freight deck. If his luck held he might escape discovery. Guttural grunts lifted from Indian throats as they made ready for their bloody coup on Fort Benton.

Padding footsteps scuffed among the the barrels near Bundy. A frigid chill slid up and down his spine. Tension sent his blood roaring through his veins. The footsteps came closer. Bundy's heart pounded unsteadily.

Then the flat cover of the barrel was lifted. A mahogany-hued face peered inside. Bundy rose, knife gripped in his fist. The Indian detected his stir of movement at the same moment that he saw Bundy. The Indian lunged backward, grunting. Bundy's left hand flashed out, caught the Indian's shoulder. In almost the same motion his knife-hand flashed up and down There was an ugly, tearing sound as the blade sank into the Indian's chest. Blood spurted, splashed over Bundy's fingers.

The Indian's escaping life was a faint moan on dark lips. Then Bundy was gripping the savage under the armpits, hauling him into the dark confines of the barrel. Quickly he drew the cover of the barrel into place.

His feverish thoughts persistently returned to Nan. He kept recalling her white, strained face, her eyes warm and bright with a light he'd never seen there before—when she'd been dragged out of the pilothouse.

He wondered if she were safe. Imprisoned alone in a stateroom he could imagine the agony of her fears. Right now he was embarked on a dangerous mission that would take him away from her. It might prove to be a one-way trip.

But he couldn't hold back. There were too many lives at stake now—the lives of all those in Fort Benton, as well as those marooned passengers somewhere back in the wilderness. He had to risk it, even if it meant never seeing Nan again—even if it meant resigning her to the fate McArdle had planned for her.

CROUCHED in an uncomfortable position with the reek of blood and sweat in his nostrils, Bundy felt his insides knot and crawl. He fought down a feeling of nausea. Perspiration beaded his brow. It ran down his face and back in damp rivulets.

Renegade roustabouts tramped about among the cargo, tapping barrels and crates and nailing the tops lightly into place so that one surging upheaval would rip the covers off. They came to Bundy's barrel. A fist pounded the side and Bundy grunted something unintelligible. Then he waited while the cover was hammered down.

Twenty minutes passed before Bundy felt a gentle bump, a slight shudder go through the packet. He knew, then, that they had tied up at the crude wharf. Afterward, men's voices lifted shrilly. Barrels were rolled from the freight deck onto the gangplank, then trundled across a rutted

square to the open gates of the stockade.

Bundy's barrel was among the first to be moved. He was jolted unmercifully. His head became one dull ache. Dark bruises appeared on his legs and arms and the feeling of sickness kept growing within him.

At last, from the call of sentries, the jangle of cavalry sabres, the curt military tones of Captain Howard Cooper, officer in charge, he realized he was inside the stockade.

Roustabouts kept bringing in more cargo. Great thumps shook the ground as barrels and crates were deposited behind the log walls. Bundy waited until he could no longer stand the strain. Then he braced himself, hunched his shoulders and heaved the cover off the barrel.

"Cooper!" he yelled fiercely, spotting the blue-clad Army officer fifty yards away in the midst of a number of troopers. "Look out! This is a trap. Injuns are in them barrels! Tell your men to fire on 'em and watch for more of the varmints from the packet!"

Even as Bundy finished his warning tirade and clambered from his hiding place, shrill whoops and yells echoed along the narrow parade grounds as barrel tops flew into space and leering Indians leaped to the ground.

Bundy's gun was in his hand and he fired pointblank at two Indians near him. Both savages dropped before they could bring pistols and knives to bear on the rushing troops.

Captain Cooper, a tall man with a straight, erect carriage, steady blue eyes and a stern face, broke his pose of immobility and shouted crisp orders. Troopers stormed out of crude barrack buildings. Some raced to the wall, began firing muskets and rifles at a line of advancing Indians, rushing up from the wharf. Other troopers whirled to meet Indians swarming out of barrels and crates.

Gunsmoke threw a gray pall across the stockade. Soldiers and Indians locked in close hand-to-hand conflict. Cooper drew his sabre. He advanced steadily through a thin rank of Indians, slashing a bloody swathe through the savages with each tremendous sweep of his gleaming weapon.

An Indian charged Bundy with a fierce yell, tomahawk swinging. The blade clipped down. It sliced along the edge of Bundy's arm. It ripped open his shirt sleeve, came away blood-stained. Then Bundy was ramming the barrel of his Navy Colt against the Indian's chest and squeezing off a shot.

A glaring red hole appeared in the mahogany-hued skin. The Indian fell forward. Bundy stepped away, dropped a second Indian with another well-placed bullet. Then he caught sight of Ben Franck, heard his furious cursing. He saw Franck shoot two soldiers in the back, then spin about. Franck spotted Bundy and fired wildly. Two bullets sped past Bundy's face. He flipped up his gun, heard with dismay the hammer drop on a fired cartridge. He relinquished the gun and raced in with drawn, bloody knife. Franck fired at his lunging figure. Bundy waited for the shock of lead. It never came. By that he knew Franck's weapon was also empty.

They met in a savage, headlong rush. Franck's head butted Bundy's jaw. Bundy staggered. His teeth bit into his lip. Blood ran warmly in his mouth. Franck's knife gashed his ribs, lifted for a finishing stroke. Bundy shifted, jumped in, then out again. In that brief interval his knife sank hilt-deep into Franck's chest.

Bundy hauled the knife out roughly. He whirled to find a panting, breathless Captain Cooper at his side. All around them the fight was raging. But now the Indians were getting the worst of it. In pairs they dropped before the onslaught of a blighting spray of bullets. Beyond the gates the same bloody story was being written.

"Man, man, how did you get in this?" Cooper demanded.

"No time for details now," gasped Bundy. "Just this. Renegades led by Tracy McArdle took over the packet downriver a ways, then took on these Indians to raid Fort Benton." He broke off, staring toward the river. A whistle blasted. "Come on, Cooper. Bring some men. Nan is locked on board with some of the crew. We've got to save 'em. McArdle may try to get away when he sees the fight is goin' against him!"

They turned and raced off toward the gate. As they ran the captain called out names in a hard, stentorian voice. Fighting troopers left their posts, joined the running men. Someone thrust a loaded Navy

pistol in Bundy's hand. They thundered out of the stockade. A cluster of Indians trying to flee to the packet were cut down by winging lead.

INDIANS and renegade roustabouts swarmed on the deck of the *Frontier King*. Rifles lifted to their shoulders and they fired on Bundy and the advancing soldiers. Two troopers dropped, lead tunneling their vitals. The rest came on at a zigzag run.

Somewhere a bell clanged. Smoke belched from the packet's broad stacks. The paddle wheels churned up a froth of water. Bundy hit the gangplank, cut down on two men who were trying to draw it in. A bullet splintered a board at Bundy's feet. Then his own gun bucked and roared. One roustabout twisted about, rolled halfway down the plank and fell into the river. The other turned and fled only to be dropped by a shot from Cooper's spouting Navy pistol.

The troopers gained the deck, broke in two ranks and stormed around the port and starboard sides. A window smashed in the lounge on the promenade deck. Bundy was racing up a companionway when he saw the door of the lounge burst open. Two bearded men staggered through. Behind them stormed Ed Pollett and others of the interned crew. The latter were armed with sections of broken chairs.

Pollett clubbed one man down. Bundy took care of the other with a tremendous blow of his knuckled fist. The packet lurched away from shore, dragging the gangplank, veering toward the channel.

"Pollett, how did you break out?" Bundy asked.

"We heard the ruckus along the shore, then the shots here on board and figgered the fight was goin' against McArdle's bunch. We made a break and ganged our guards, though two of the boys are bad hurt." His attention slid past Bundy. "Hell, there's some of the varmints now!" He pointed.

Bundy saw three Indians slinking past a deckhouse. Pollett and two crew hands raced after the redskins. Bundy sucked in a huge breath, flexed his tiring muscles and vaulted up the companionway toward the pilothouse. Shadows of desperation and rage hollowed out the curved pockets under his blazing eyes. There was no caution in him, just a savage will to destroy.

He almost tore the door off its hinges when he barged into the pilothouse. He had a swift glimpse of Nan, loosely lashed to a chair, her face registering shocked surprise and hope. Then McArdle was turning away from the wheel.

Stark fear twisted the commission man's face. His cheeks seemed suddenly thin and gaunt. Bundy's voice lashed at him unsparingly.

"Remember I said I'd live to kill you and Franck!" he shouted. "Well, Frank is dead. Now it's your turn."

McArdle threw himself to one side as Bundy fired. The bullet meant for McArdle knocked a chunk from a wheel spoke. His own gun came up and frothed redly. Metal clanged against metal. Something stung Bundy's hand. Numbness crept up his arm. He dropped the pistol, followed it to the floor as another slug sprayed dust and splinters into his eyes.

Bundy rolled to his knees, clawed for his knife. He heard a scraping, screeching sound. He looked up. Nan had forced herself upright. Her dress was torn, her hair disarrayed, but her eyes blazed fiercely. She dragged chair and all toward McArdle, flung herself against his legs as McArdle fired pointblank at Bundy.

The explosion rocked the small room. Gunsmoke drifted past Bundy's straining eyes. He got his fingers around the handle of his knife. McArdle fell to his knees, but got up again. His gun roared. Bundy saw the bright red flash, felt the scouring slash of pain along his left shoulder.

Teeth bared in an angry grimace, he flicked his right arm back. He had to fight an overpowering dullness in his muscles. But his will made the arm respond. At the end of the forward arc the knife left his shaking fingers. It sped toward McArdle.

The shimmering blade caught McArdle high in the chest. He dropped his gun. Bundy came to his feet, only half conscious that Nan had freed herself from the chair, though a strand of rope still dangled from one ankle.

The deck was pitching and Bundy's legs were unsteady. McArdle was clawing at the knife handle, reeling drunkenly. Bundy

lunged at him. He rammed his head against McArdle's chin, drove an awkward round-house right to the same place, then watched the commission man slowly sag and collapse.

Bundy's own knees started to unhinge. He would have fallen but slender arms were suddenly supporting him. Blindly he stumbled to the wheel, found a hold with one hand down which blood was slowly dripping.

Then Nan was pressing against him, her arms warm and vibrant, holding him with a wild hunger that answered the feverish tumult going on inside of him. Days ago, before disaster had struck into their lives, Bundy would not have believed this could happen. But now it seemed altogether natural that Nan Cooper should be in his arms and that her lips should be warm and possessive and demanding against his own.

"Oh, Jack," she murmured brokenly, her eyes brilliant through tears. "I—I thought you—were dead—that I'd never see you again." She broke off as he became aware of the blood on his arm, of the pain-etched lines in his face. "Jack, you're hurt—"

"It's nothin' serious," he assured her, managing a tight grin.

There was shouting behind them. Boots thumped into the room.

NAN turned, and rushed into Captain Howard Cooper's arms. "Howard!"

"Nan," said the captain huskily. "I'm glad you're safe." He kissed her, then pushed her away to look at her. "I was a fool to let you make the trip. You might have been killed—or even worse—"

"Let's not talk about it," Nan urged hastily, her face white again with disturbing thoughts of what she had escaped.

Cooper released her, moved up beside Ed Pollett who had rushed into the pilothouse with him. Bundy noted that their faces were exultant through the film of dust and dirt streaking their skin.

"Jack, you really did a job on that man," Cooper murmured, gesturing to McArdle's sprawled shape.

"Fight's just about over," added Pollett, scrubbing his bearded chin with a calloused palm. "The Indians are licked. We're in charge of the packet again."

Bundy's taut features broke to permit a weary grin. The air of vibrant, indefinable power that had always characterized him was never more noticeable than at this moment. He straightened, held himself erect though it took a hard toll of his stamina.

"That's good news," he said. "Ed, get below. Take any men you need and stoke up the boilers. We're movin' back downriver."

"What for, Bundy?" demanded Cooper. "I can't leave the fort."

"You haven't heard the whole story," said Bundy as Pollett raced off. "McArdle dumped all my passengers off at the last wood camp leavin' them to the Injuns. Got to save 'em if it ain't too late. You can't go back now. We're already adrift in midstream."

He shouted down the Army man's amazed protests. He lurched to the wheel, awkwardly swung the lumbering packet into the channel. In ten minutes the engines were sending their pulsating rhythm up through the boat, and the flashing paddles were building a foaming wake behind the speeding craft.

Only then did he consent to have Nan and Howard Cooper look to his wounds. One bullet had passed through the fleshy part of his left shoulder. The wound was clean. Nan bathed it, then stemmed the flow of blood with a crude, thick bandage made from a section of her petticoat. His gun-hand was stiff and there was a shallow furrow along the knuckles up to the wrist where the bullet that had struck his gun had ricocheted. He refused to have it bandaged and it took both Nan and the captain together to persuade Bundy to relinquish the wheel to Ed Pollett until he had gotten some rest.

Then Bundy gave the complete account to Captain Cooper. The captain merely shook his head in silent amazement and horror. And later, when Pollett wormed the story of Bundy's lone-handed fight against the renegades out of the river pilot, Cooper's stern gaze glittered with frank admiration.

It was near noon of the next day before a limping Bundy, with one arm in a crude sling, sighted the marooned passengers of the *Frontier King* from the pilothouse. They were a weary, bedraggled lot, but they let out a whoop of joy when they sighted the packet. From ex-

cited, babbling tongues Bundy heard how they'd wandered through the wilderness, keeping always to the river in the wild hope that they might be rescued. The only food they'd found was some wild berries, but they had been fortunate enough not to meet any Indians.

Back in the pilothouse with the *Frontier King* once more pointed toward Fort Benton, Captain Cooper spoke quietly to Bundy.

"Jack, you've done somethin' any man can be proud of," he said with sincere feeling. "You took a big risk buckin' McArdle and his outlaws, hiding in those barrels and giving the alarm. But you saved the fort and you saved all your passengers. I'm in your debt and so is the United States Army."

"Shucks," said Bundy, color rising into his cheeks. "I couldn't let those skunks pull a sandy like that without fightin' back. No Injuns are slaughterin' white men while I can stop 'em. And nobody's takin' over the *Frontier King* unless they kill me first."

"Bundy, did you ever think of joinin' the army? The army could use a man like you."

Bundy scowled in heavy thought. He looked at Cooper, then his eyes drifted toward the Missouri, the sweep of wooded shore.

"I reckon it'd be a nice life, Cooper," he said slowly. "But I'm a river man—always was. Nothin' can change that."

Then he turned, startled. Nan was standing in the doorway. Now she came over to him. Bundy slipped an arm about her waist. There was a quick, soft yielding of her body. Her eyes were bright and shining.

"Nothing can change you?" she asked lightly.

"Well—" Bundy halted, confused. "I've always been alone. Now it's different. I don't reckon the Missouri would ever be the same for me without you." His face sobered. "But it's no kind of life for a woman."

"Who said it isn't?" she asked. "I'll take you just as you are—river and all—if you want *me*."

Nan had her answer in his rapid grin, in the way his arm tightened about her waist. Neither of them were aware of Cooper walking out of the pilothouse. They were both staring down at the winding river—the pulsating, vibrating stream that held their future. And they were smiling at the happy visions that future called up in their minds.

America was moving westward, expanding and growing. They would move and grow with it.

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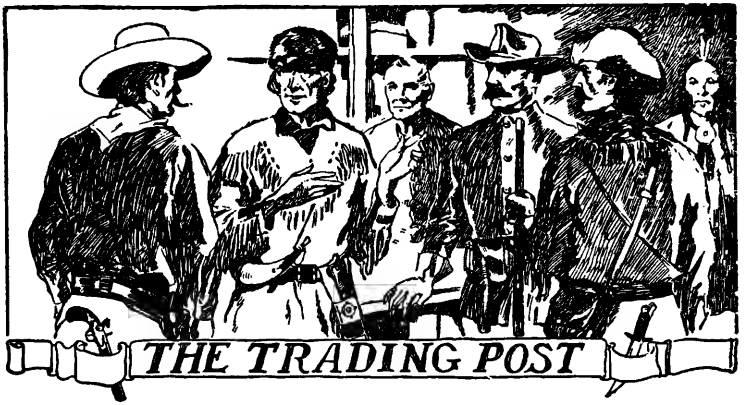

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THE EDITOR.

DEATH RIDES A FAST PONY

By LEE THOMAS

THE Kiowas came at a fast gallop. Cimarron Payne raised his rifle to his shoulder and squinted one eye. He spoke to his companion who lay hidden behind the rocky ledge with him.

"Let's get a few, Cowan."

Cowan smiled. "Okay, Cimarron."

Cimarron Payne's bullet missed the Indian in the lead. The lead socked into the brave's cayuse. The horse went down, throwing the Kiowa, who landed on his feet. Screaming, he ran for shelter in the rocks to his right.

"Missed him," grunted Cimarron Payne.

The Kiowa was still in the clear.

Payne sighted on the running redskin. His cheek flat against the stock of his long rifle, he took his time before letting the hammer drop. The bullet caught the Kiowa and dumped him over.

"Number one," said Payne. "You havin' any luck, Cowan?"

"A little, Cimarron."

Now the Kiowas, driven back by the bullets of the two whites, held a war council beyond gun-reach. And Cimarron Payne smiled as he bit off a chew of tobacco. The war-party, consisting of about fifty braves, had jumped him and Cowan a few minutes ago, evidently thinking they were attacking two tenderfeet and would find easy prey. Now they were thinking different.

"Watch the ridge behind us," said Cimarron Payne. "I'll watch the hills ahead."

Cowan's rifle spoke. A brave, sneaking along the ridge, hollered and fell on his face. Cimarron Payne turned and shot at another Kiowa. He did not miss, either. He seldom missed.

The Kiowas drew back out of rifle-range again. They were a stubborn race, full of pride and fight, and this was something they had not expected. Soon a hidden brave called from across the ravine.

"Who is there?"

Cowan grinned at Cimarron Payne. "I don't savvy this Kiowa lingo," he said. "I kin talk Sioux an' Cheyenne an' a little Hopi but this is new to me. What'd he say?"

Cimarron Payne told him. He hollered in Kiowa. "California Joe Cowan an' Cimarron Payne."

Concern was in the brave's hail:

"And Cimarron Payne?"

Cimarron Payne had to smile. "That's me," he declared.

The Kiowas withdrew, then. Soon, a warbonneted party, they rode across the foothills, carefully keeping beyond gun-range.

"They don't like your name," said Cowan.

"Reckon not."

THIS Cimarron Payne was a tall man. He was not very broad but he was wiry and muscular. He was a member of the buckskin legion who scouted the west for the troops and settlers. He was a deadly shot with either rifle or pistol. He had to be. If he had not been, he would have been killed.

He was not a gunman or killer. He was quiet, unassuming, but he was as tough as Damascus steel. There was one part of his body he intended to die with and be buried with. And that was his scalp.

His real name was D. L. Payne. Nobody seems to know what the D. L. stood for. History holds little record of the doings of this frontier scout. But history does record that he had fought the Indians along the Cimarron River. Thereafter he was known as Cimarron Payne.

While still a youth, he fought through the Civil War. He fought for the North. He killed men, because that was his job. And, when the struggle was over, he went back home. But his soul craved excitement and his hands wanted to feel the polished butt of a gun, not the rough handles of a plow. He saddled his horse.

"You going to town?" asked his sister.

"No."

Alarm ran across her eyes. "Then where—?"

"Kansas."

No more was said. And so, into the rough hard life of the Kansas frontier, came this stranger. Here was no peace and quiet. Here was the making of a frontier. Here was excitement and danger.

He rode with General Custer. That was in 1868. The Cheyennes, under the leadership of Tall Bull, had raided a settlement on the Republican River. Farms and ranches had been burned, their owners massacred. And two women had been carried off by the marauders. And the governor of Kansas sent for Cimarron Payne.

"Payne," he said, "we face a deadly foe. Reports have it that the southern and northern Cheyennes have joined Tall Bull. What do you advise?"

"I'll raise a group of volunteers, Governor. Then, with General Custer leading the government troops, we'll ride against these Indians. Will you grant me that power?"

"The power is yours, Payne."

So the volunteers were gathered and Cimarron Payne became, for the time being, known as Captain Payne. But snow covered the Wichita range and the lower banks of the Cimarron River. The going was tough. Several horses and mules died.

Grim determination kept the soldiers and volunteers to the trail. This Indian trouble had to be settled for once and for always. But the Cheyennes had headed for the salt plains in New Mexico.

Then the soldiers left the snow and went out into the desert. Here horses and mules died of thirst, not cold weather. Then, on March 13, Cimarron Payne rode back into camp.

"The Cheyennes," he said, "are camped on Red River."

Custer's eyes lit up.

"How many, Cimarron?"

Cimarron Payne smiled. "Plenty of them. Lots of tepees."

Custer nodded. "We'll ride."

When the Cheyennes saw the approaching soldiers, they rode out to meet them, their hands held high in the sign of peace. A chief did the speaking.

"I am Roman Nose," he said. "Here with me is Lone Wolf, Yellow Nose, and

Cross Timber. We wish to talk with you."

"Then come into camp," said Cimarron Payne.

The chiefs exchanged glances. Then Roman Nose nodded. In camp, Custer threw them immediately under arrest.

"You may return, Yellow Nose," he said. "Tell your warriors that I am holding Lone Wolf and Cross Timber and Roman Nose. When you return the women, I shall free your chiefs."

Yellow Nose returned to his camp. When he returned he said, "The women are not with us. They are at Little Robe camp. We will get them and then you will let our chiefs return to their people."

"Bring them in," said Cimarron Payne.

But the Indians were too sure of themselves. They outnumbered the soldiers. So they departed—squaws, dogs, papooses. They did not think the whites would execute their leaders.

"Hang the chiefs," said Cimarron Payne.

There, in open sight, the chiefs were led to trees, and nooses were fitted around their necks. Soon an Indian came loping into camp.

"We are coming with the women," he said.

The white women wept with joy. Roman Nose said, "Now you must turn us loose, Man-with-the-Long-Hair!"

Custer looked at Cimarron Payne. "How about it?"

"Hang onto those chiefs," said Cimarron Payne. "Take them back to Kansas unless the Cheyennes return to their reservation." He spat. "You got the upper hand, General. Use it."

That was the best way out. They were facing a dangerous enemy and they were outnumbered. Even at that, the Indians did some fighting. But they did not dare charge the soldiers for fear they would kill their own chiefs.

They did remember Payne—and paid him compliments—in lead.

But no Indian bullet made could kill Cimarron Payne. No white bullet, either. He lived to be an old man. He died a natural death.

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WHEN Mrs. Brown asked Grocer White why he didn't wrap her loaf of bread in the usual paper bag, he gave her a mighty quick and important answer. He told her how much our armed forces need every kind of paper to wrap the invasion ammunition, weapons, foods and medical supplies in. And Mrs. Brown, of course, was equally quick to see the importance of paper conservation not only at the store but in the home. Now she carries a market basket or shopping bag to save precious paper bags. Not a single piece of paper is wasted at the Brown home. Magazines like this, for instance, are passed along when read. Mrs. Brown is sure doing her duty. Are You?

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A FOAM-FLECKED PONY rears to sudden halt . . . its grinning, dusty rider leaps groundward, flinging sweat-stained saddlebags to the waiting station agent. . . . Eager hands open the sealed, bulging pouch. . . . The Pony Express has arrived! Then, as the trail-worn courier tells friends of his hazardous journey—perhaps of blizzard, sandstorm, or scalp-hunting redskins—welcome news from far places travels on excited voices through the crowding throng. . . .

LETTERS TO FRONTIER are much the same as this—carrying news, asking questions interesting to all those thrilled by the Old West. PONY EXPRESS provides a meeting place for all FRONTIER readers. We will print the most interesting letters received, whether critical, praising, or questioning. Writers' names will be printed in full unless initials are requested. Address FRONTIER STORIES, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York City 19, N. Y.

THE EDITOR

FRONTIERSMAN

We particularly enjoyed getting this letter from Captain Steele, a regimental surgeon with the British Army 'way back in 1857, when our own Army in Blue was fighting Indians.

DEAR SIR:

Through the courtesy of a friend, and authority on the Old West, I have been able to see FRONTIER STORIES. May I say as one who has always read all that I could about pioneer days that the stories in your magazine have the ring of truth. In them I recognize under other names many well known figures of those past heroic days.

As an Englisman who had two great-uncles who practiced medicine in the Old West soon after the hectic days of '49, I find solace and release in going back and reading of the old days on the trail. In the last war as a medical officer in the army I had a taste of trekking in Macedonia —winter and summer—mules, horses, fires, snow and heat. Sometimes the smell of a wood fire brings back those days of bivouac. I recaptured some of the earlier backwoods days on a brief visit to Canada and the United States in 1939. Rogers' Rangers were surely some of the first "Commando" troops, as we call them here. And Sir William Johnson, His Majesty's Superintendent of Indians, was surely—like your Admiral Nimitz—a man!

Life was grim last summer, but this house, built in 1821, withstood the blitzes. The Allies are advancing on the enemy from all sides and though the way may still be hard, the end is certain.

Russell V. Steele,
Penrhyn Lodge,
Gloucester Gate, London.

INDIAN DANCES

SIRS:

I have just made the acquaintance of FRONTIER STORIES, and I think it's a wonderful magazine. The Indian characters fascinate me. I'm looking forward to reading more about their customs. I'm wondering, for instance, if their dances were all formal, with prescribed steps, or whether they indulged in spontaneous improvisations. And whether the women danced too—and if they did, whether they danced by themselves, or with the men.

Rosemary Wharton,
Philadelphia, Pa.

The dances had fixed forms, some of them complicated. The men and women danced separately and with different steps, until white men's dancing affected the Indian customs and brought about some mixed dancing.

THE INDIAN'S SIDE

SIRS:

I have read your magazine for a very long time and enjoy it to a great extent. It is one of the few and far between sensible magazines on the news stands. The stories are good.

It does seem though that you could get a more original cover. It is always the same. Pioneer woman and an equally naked savage and the hero in the gallant act of saving her from the Indian's clutches. I do think that the artist who is in charge of the cover could think of something different, say an Indian and a pioneer in hand to hand combat, an Indian warrior astride a horse, and many other things.

The artist who draws the pictures for such stories as "Circle Your Wagons," "Sabers and Scalp Knives" and "War of the Wild Roses" is very good.

Why don't you go in for a change in your stories, let the red-men win once in a while, you know they did. Write a story about an Indian instead of the white man. I don't care what anybody says, I think that the Indians were justified in fighting for what they thought was right and was theirs. It is the same principle for which we are fighting now. The white man took away from the Indian as Hitler and his gang did, the Indian fought back as we are doing. But don't get the idea that I believe that Hitler is justified.

Altogether, though, you magazine is a good one even if I have criticized it a bit.

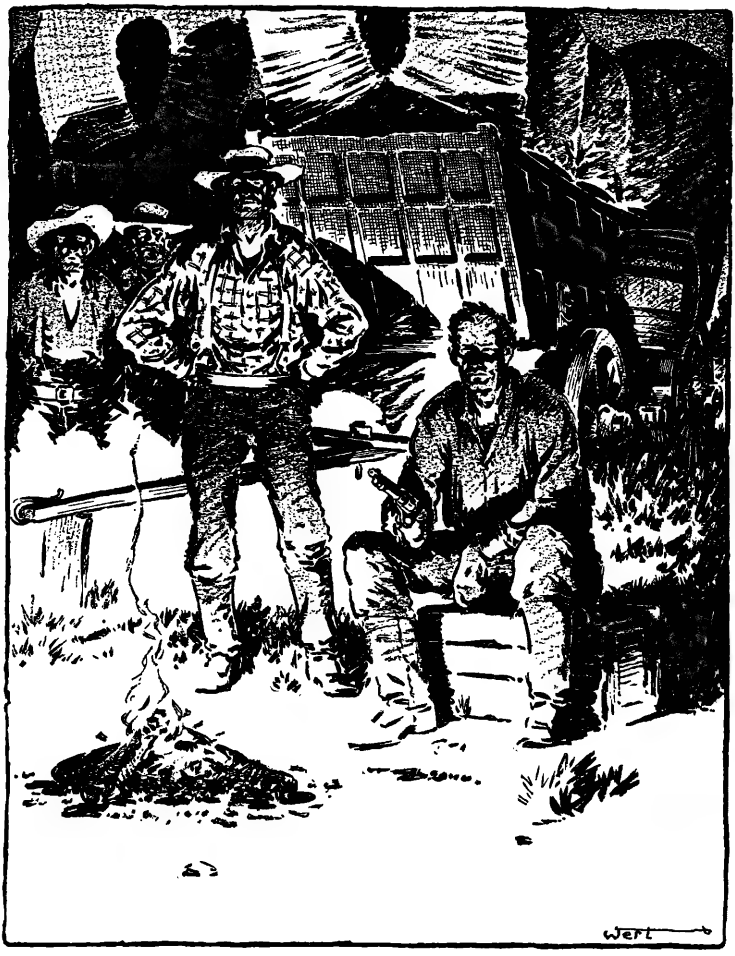
Douglas Audsley,
College Park, Ga.

TEN WAGONS for TEXAS

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

TOO many men already knew the contents of those five-foot-long oak cases. Cole Brandon's gray eyes narrowed as the two dock hands came up the plank with the last case to go in Conestoga Number Four, one of the ten heavy red-and-blue wagons lined up along the pier.

The man at the rear end of the case, a lean sallow, slack-jawed fellow with a



Brandon, gun in hand, nodded. Simms gripped the gambler by the collar.

The Brandon wagons freighted trouble. But a bigger storm was brewing at delivery point, down on the brawling Pecos.

A Novel of Guns Beyond the Border

cast in the right eye, stumbled awkwardly as they approached the wagon. Cole Brandon heard him yell the warning in a low-pitched guttural voice. The heavy case started to topple. The short bewhiskered man at the front end let go entirely. The case hit the wooden dock with a crash. Two of the boards nailed across the top were ripped from their moorings. The blue barrel of a rifle was pushed through the packing of straw.

Cole Brandon's rangy frame galvanized into action. His long jaw set tight with anger, he leaped over to the case and kicked the rifle barrel back through the straw. A Walker .44 Dragoon Colt leaped into his right hand. He stuck it into the ribs of the quaking sallow-faced fellow.

"Nail it up," Cole grated. "Pronto."

The bewhiskered man stared at the weapon reflectively, and then at the tall, powerful man behind the gun. The crowd of loungers at the Independence dock gaped and came closer. Cole Brandon, owner of the ten finest Conestogas on the Santa Fe trail, wondered how many of them had seen the rifle barrel, or suspected the contents of the dozens of cases that had been transferred from the steamer *Prairie Belle* to the red and blue wagons.

"A mite quick on the temper, ain't you, mister?" the bewhiskered chap grinned. There was no mirth in his green eyes.

Cole Brandon smiled coldly. Dropping the case on the dock had been no accident. The slack-jawed man had stumbled deliberately with the intention of spilling open the case and revealing the contents. Someone in the crowd around the wagons was interested in knowing more about the mysterious cases. He had probably paid a few dollars to the dock hands.

"I asked you to nail it up," Cole said. His eyes flickered around the crowd gathering closer. Independence, squatting on the flats along the river, housed all kinds —mountain men with wolfskin caps; Yankee traders from the east, ready to drive their lumbering wagons down the trail to Santa Fe; card sharps from the river boats, dusky-skinned, filthily-clad settlement Indians, an occasional Mexican dandy like the slim, swarthy man with the curling black mustache standing a few yards away.

The bewhiskered man spat in the dirt. He was inches shorter than Cole Brandon, but heavier in the shoulders. His nose was twisted out of shape and there was a white scar running down his neck from the left ear, evidence of many dock fights. He grinned again but made no move to get the hammer and nails.

The slack-jawed man had regained his confidence. Neither of them were armed and Cole Brandon realized he couldn't shoot. It had been a bluff from the start but the squat man with the scraggly black whiskers accepted the challenge.

The crowd pushed up closer, grinning in anticipation of a fight. Cole glanced down at the expensive black frock coat he wore. In Independence it wasn't beneath the dignity of a wealthy man like himself to engage in a street brawl with a dock hand. A man had to be a man whether he owned a spavined mule or ten Conestogas with five thousand dollars' worth of trade on each of them, rolling down the Santa Fe trail.

"Put up that damned blunderbuss," the squat man grinned, "an' come fightin', mister."

Cole Brandon turned toward the wagon. Gravely, he slipped out of the coat and hung the flat-topped Stetson on the brake handle. His driver glanced down at him and shrugged.

The dock hand had already stripped to the waist. His chest was broad and matted with black hair. Heavily muscled, he pranced around awkwardly, small eyes gleaming.

Again Cole Brandon glanced at the crowd as he unbuckled the gun belt. Only the Mexican with the beady black eyes and the pearl button on the tight-fitting satin jacket would be interested in the contents of the cases. In a few months, possibly a few days, even before the last caravan took the trail for Santa Fe, the Texans would be in open revolt. The closing of the trade route was a foregone conclusion. Traders frantically organized the caravan, anxious to get off before the thousands upon thousands of dollars' worth of cotton goods, calico, cutlery, etc., went to rot or rust in the Independence warehouses.

Cole walked forward slowly. He shoved out a heavy fist as the squat man rushed toward him. He lashed out hard with his right hand and then stepped back. Blood flowed from the bewhiskered man's mouth. It dripped down his beard and he grinned.

Cole stepped back out of the way of the squat man's wild swing. He came in close and slammed both fists to the face. The bewhiskered man gasped from the pain. The grin left his face. He tried to get in close and grapple with his assailant.

"Git him, Dade," the slack-jawed man yelped. "Trip him up."

Cole Brandon stepped nimbly away. He knew if the short man managed to get him to the ground, it would be hard going. The dock men had their own fighting methods. They were not beyond gouging a man's eyes out or ripping off an ear.

AGAIN the dock hand leaped forward and Cole Brandon dropped down low. In a half crouch, he aimed a blow at the squat man's stomach. His fist dug deep into the flesh at the break of the ribs. The dock hand doubled over, face white. Gasping for breath, his hands were crossed over his stomach. He sat down abruptly.

"Give him the boot," a voice roared from the crowd.

Cole smiled. The squat man had had enough fighting. Had the tables been reversed, Cole realized he would have received the bewhiskered man's square-toed shoe in his face until the flesh was mangled.

"Nail it up," Cole Brandon told the slack-jawed man. He turned to the wagon for his coat and hat. The Mexican dandy was lighting a thin brown-papered cigarette. He glanced again at the cases and then sauntered away. The crowd drifted as the dock hand came back hastily with the hammer and nails and banged the loose boards shut.

The man on the ground had regained his breath but he was still too weak to get up.

"Damn if I don't wish I'd nailed them boards in the beginnin'," he grinned sickly. "What in hell's so important about a case o' guns?"

Cole shrugged. He strapped on the gun belt. The slim Mexican was going into one of the saloons along the main street leading up from the pier. Cole walked over to the case.

"Who paid you to drop the case?" Cole asked quietly.

The slack-jawed fellow had come back with a bucket of water from the river. He gaped and the fear came into his eyes. The squat man grinned.

"You seen that greaser dandy," he said, "him with the pearl-buttons? He give us two dollars apiece to let it drop."

"Didn't you know what was in the case?" Cole persisted. Since purchasing the consignment of rifles months ago, he'd tried to keep it a secret. The cases had come down the Ohio on flatboats into the Mississippi. The *Prairie Belle* had taken them the rest of the way to Independence.

"They don't tell me what the *Belle* is carryin'," the dock hand chuckled. "She comes in an' we got orders to load 'em on Brandon's wagons." The squat man glanced down the row of neat Conestogas. Each vehicle had the word *BRANDON* inscribed on the side in gilt letters. "I reckon Brandon's a pretty big man in the town," the dock hand said. "Never run across him."

"When you do," Cole said, "you'll know him." He watched until the last case was loaded onto the wagons and the Conestogas were rolling down toward the grove of cottonwoods where the last caravan to Santa Fe was being organized. Then he walked toward the saloon into which the Mexican had gone.

The Devil's Horn was already filled although it was still eary in the afternoon. Men recognized him as he came through the doors. Ted Bigby, the scout, called after him.

"You loaded, Cole?"

Cole Brandon nodded. His eyes sought out the Mexican dandy at the other end of the bar. Bigby, a huge figure of a man with a mop of yellow hair and laughing blue eyes, sauntered over. Bigby was already a little drunk. He spoke in a booming voice from a cavernous chest.

"We're celebratin' the last damn crew to leave Independence for Santa Fe," Bigby called hoarsely. "Then we're all gettin' in this war, Brandon. We're drivin' Santa Anna an' his mob clean back to Mexico City."

Cole nodded again. He poured himself a drink from the bottle the bartender had pushed toward him. He listened to the laughter after Bigby's remark. Already, men from the States were swarming across the border into Texas to align themselves with the newly formed Texas regiments. Blood had been spilled in Texas territory and at the thought of it Cole Brandon's jaw tightened.

"There's fifty of us," Bigby resumed, "leavin' Santa Fe and movin' in to Texas. You comin', Brandon?"

"I didn't hear of any war between Mexico and the States," Cole said quietly. There had not even been a declaration of Texas independence. The Texans were disorganized and President Santa Anna had already sent an army north to quell the first sign of resistance to his rule.

Ted Bigby slouched closer to the immaculate man at the bar. Bigby was dressed in the mountain man's buckskin outfit, greasy, wrinkled. A huge knife hung at his side. The scout's wide face was white with rage.

"You heard there's been men killed," Bigby growled. "You heard o' what happened at Vasquez?"

Cole Brandon's gray eyes moved down the bar toward the Mexican. The mention of Vasquez was a knife in his heart. With an effort he concealed the emotion in his voice. The Mexican commandant at Vasquez had placed fifteen Texans against a stone wall and shot them down in cold blood for objecting to one of Santa Anna's manifestos.

"Vasquez," Cole said slowly, "is Mexican territory."

"It won't be," Bigby snorted, "when we git down there, Brandon." He studied the trader contemptuously. "Reckon you'll be too busy makin' money on this war, Brandon, to do any o' the fightin'."

Cole Brandon turned around quietly. He hooked both elbows over the bar. He had a reputation in Independence and on the trail. He'd built up his business in five years' time. He knew what to buy and he got his own price for it. He had the most dependable drivers, the finest stock, and the best wagons in Independence. Men envied him as the shiftless inevitably envy the one who has by perseverance and skill passed them by.

"The fighting hasn't started," Cole said tersely. "When it does, and the States declare war, it'll be fought with guns and knives, and not with mouths."

Bigby's hand dropped to the shaft of the long knife at his side.

"A bullet moves faster than a knife," Cole Brandon said softly. "You're drunk, Bigby." He didn't want any trouble with the scout. Bigby had been along with him on too many caravans. Sober, he was industrious and dependable. Drunk, he'd fight the devil, knife against pitchfork.

Two of the traders came over and grabbed Bigby by the arms.

"We're leavin' in the mornin', Ted," one of them cautioned. "You don't want to be laid up with a bullet hole in you?"

Bigby permitted himself to be pulled away from the bar. He flung back a final retort over his shoulder.

"If we git in this war," the scout yelled, "it ain't bein' won by no damned moneybags."

Cole Brandon felt the hostile eyes on him. He turned back to the bottle, his broad back to the crowd. After awhile talk started up again. Men went back to the card tables. Ted Bigby was forcibly dragged from the room.

The young Mexican walked over to one of the casino games and watched idly while he puffed on the cigarette. Men looked up at him, the hatred and contempt in their eyes. The Mexican didn't seem to notice it. The United States and Mexico were at peace; he had as much right in the States as an American had in Texas.

Cole watched till the dandy went out into the street. Then slapping a coin on the bar, he followed. He caught up to the man as he was turning up an alley.

"Buenos," Cole said.

THE Mexican stopped. For a moment Cole Brandon saw the surprise in the man's dark eyes. Then it was gone and he was in complete control of himself, face bland and expressionless.

"You want to see me, *señor!"* he asked in perfect English.

The American fell in step with him. "Reckon we're both a little unpopular in this town," he grinned. "When you're outnumbered you look for friends."

"Si," the Mexican said. He was noncommittal.

"You heard of me?" Cole asked. "Brandon wagons?"

Again the Mexican inclined his head. "Permit me," he said apologetically. "I am Jose Alvarez."

"Mexico City?" Cole asked.

"Vera Cruz," Alvarez told him. "I am touring your beautiful country with my sister. It is fascinating."

Cole Brandon nodded grimly. "Glad you like it," he said brusquely. He placed his cards on the table to see the effect.

"I see you're interested in rifles, *Señor* Alvarez."

"Rifles?" the dandy's eyebrows lifted.

He touched the tip of one black mustachio with a manicured finger.

"You paid the two dock hands to drop one of my cases," Cole said. "You wanted to see what was in them."

Alvarez walked along in silence. Mechanically, he took a cigarette from a silver case and lit it. Cole Brandon saw the little smile playing around the corners of the Mexican's mouth.

"You Americanos," Alvarez chuckled. "You are to the—the point."

Cole Brandon laughed harshly. "We're playing a game," he observed. "Let's use a little common sense." He watched closely to see the effect. Jose Alvarez placed a mask over his face.

They stopped outside the Culver House, bar and hotel.

"My quarters," Alvarez said. "You wish to stop in, *Señor* Brandon?"

"Not now," Cole said. He paused. "You going down the trail tomorrow?" he asked.

Alvarez nodded. *"Adios,"* he grinned. "Possibly, we shall do business, Señor Brandon."

"Possibly," Cole said. He stepped back as a huge figure of a man crashed through the door and sprawled in the gutter beside him. The big man laughed uproariously. He scrambled to his feet, wide, bony face flushed with drink. He had red hair and bright blue eyes—the innocent eyes of a child.

Two thick-set men with hard ruthless eyes stood in the doorway watching. He staggered forward toward the door, fists balled, laughing good-naturedly. Cole Brandon looked up at him reflectively. He was at least six feet, five inches tall and must have weighed two hundred and forty pounds.

"Reckon I'll try that again, gents," the big man grinned. He stumbled forward. Sober, Cole knew he could have cracked the skulls of the two bar bouncers.

Jose Alvarez leaned against an awning post and watched indifferently. The big man fell into the two hard cases by the door. They split and went at him from either side, fists cutting into the drunken man's face. Still he laughed and swung his huge arms in wild arcs. One fist managed to catch the fighter on the left. It struck the man's jaw with a thud and he sprawled out in the gutter.

Cole watched the fallen fighter pick up a broken whiffletree, one end iron-bound, from the muck. He came forward with this deadly weapon in his hand. Blood poured down his nose onto his shirt front. There was murder in his eyes.

"Not that," Cole said slowly. "A fight's a fight, mister."

The bouncer turned, mouth open. "I ain't askin' you, Brandon," he snapped.

"I'm telling *you*," Cole Brandon observed.

The giant and the second bouncer were wrestling in the doorway. Men were spewing out of the windows and side door to watch the fight. The giant's booming laugh could be heard above the yells of the crowd.

The man with the whiffletree eyed the two. He glanced again at Cole Brandon. The men wrestling on the walk staggered back. The giant went down driving against Cole's knees and knocking him into the gutter.

The bouncer with the club leaped forward, eyes glittering. He aimed a kick at Cole Brandon's face. A gun cracked from the walk and the bouncer screamed with pain. He dropped the club and gripped his right forearm with his left hand. Blood seeped through the fingers.

Jose Alvarez stood near the post, smoke curling up from a small black pistol in his right hand. Cole Brandon had never seen the make before. He sat up, grinning.

"Reckon I owe you that one, Jose," he said.

Jose Alvarez bowed politely. The wounded bouncer stared at the two of them, the hatred in his pale blue eyes.

"I ain't forgettin' this, greaser," he said quietly.

The giant had finally pummeled the other bouncer into submission. He stood up and staggered toward Cole Brandon, blue eyes wide as saucers, bubbling over with good nature.

"You fightin', mister?" he asked.

Cole grinned. "Have a drink on me, partner," he said.

The giant threw a brawny arm around

his shoulders and hauled him into the saloon. Out of the corner of his eyes Cole saw Jose Alvarez go into the side door.

HE would be seeing the Mexican more. Alvarez was interested in him—in the rifles packed in those ten Conestogas waiting in the grove.

The big man slapped a huge hand on the bar, "whiskey," he roared.

The bartender stared at him distastefully. *"Dinero,"* he scowled.

Cole Brandon placed a silver dollar on the bar. "What do they call you?" he asked the giant.

"Tolivar Simms," the big man boomed. "Best damned wagoner on the Pike."

Cole nodded. Wagoners usually referred to the Cumberland Road as the "Pike." His own drivers had come from the Pennsylvania highway.

"Figure on going to Santa Fe?" he asked.

Tolivar Simms poured himself a beer glass full of the liquor and downed it without taking breath.

"Goin' anywhere my feet carry me," he grinned.

"Like to drive a Brandon wagon?" Cole asked. "We could use another driver." He had plenty of drivers but men like Simms would come in handy later on. He'd already hired six others in addition to the drivers. There were twenty in the party and he knew he could rely upon all of them.

"You got your man," Simms grunted after taking another tumbler full of whiskey for a chaser.

"See me in the morning," Cole said. "We're taking the trail." Over at a corner table he saw the three men playing cards and watching him at the same time. He recognized the lean, thin-faced gambler, Lee Abel.

"Join us," Abel invited. He had a straight-lipped mouth and a long acquiline nose. His hair was black as an Indian's and parted in the middle, slicked down flat on his head. A flat-crowned California Stetson lay on the table beside him.

Cole hesitated and then walked over. He had no liking for Abel. The gambler already had three killings to his credit. Men didn't like Abel's game—the way he used those long white fingers in manipulating a deck of cards. When they objected, they died.

"Pulling out tomorrow?" Abel asked.

Cole nodded. He took the proffered seat. Abel wasn't interested in playing cards with him. The gambler wanted information. It showed in his black shining eyes. Cole was reminded of a rattler he'd killed once on the trail. The eyes had the same expression.

The other two men at the table tried to study their cards but their ears were open. One was short and fat with a fleshy, purple face and small pigs' eyes; the other undoubtedly had Indian blood in him. He was dark-skinned, hatchet-faced, with peculiar gray-blue eyes. Cole Brandon knew both of them. They ran with Lee Abel.

"Howdee, Blane," he said to the fat man. Blane Cordell nodded. Pete Santon's somber face cracked into a smile.

"Takin' all the wagons?" Abel persisted.

"All," Cole Brandon said. "Well loaded," he finished dryly. He knew Abel was interested in those oak cases also. There were over six hundred of the latest rifles turned out in the Springfield armory, packed in the sixty cases on the Conestogas —along with thousands of rounds of ammunition.

"We're figgerin' on runnin' down to Santa Fe ourselves," Abel drawled. "Might be the last time, Brandon."

Blane Cordell shuffled the cards. "You in this, Brandon?" he asked.

Cole nodded. "I'll sit in a few hands," he said. Lee Abel wanted information from him; he wanted to learn something about Abel's plans also. The gambler had never gone to Santa Fe before. He must have something in mind.

"Takin' the usual stuff down?" Abel asked after awhile.

Cole Brandon shrugged. "Some guns," he said steadily. He knew Abel had heard of the incident down at the dock. If he could convince the gambler that only one of the cases contained rifles, Abel might lose interest.

"Reckon they'll be good trade goods these days," Abel chuckled. "A man could make a fortune with a wagon load of 'em, Brandon." His black snake-like eyes shifted to Cole Brandon's face.

Inwardly, the trader laughed. Lee Abel

would truly be astounded if he knew that ten Conestogas were piled with the rifles.

"The Texans could use 'em," Cole said quietly, "and so could Santa Anna."

"Dependin', upon who would pay the most for 'em," Abel smiled coldly.

"I'm American," Cole Brandon stated. "The States are neutral."

Abel nodded in agreement. "I'm not stickin' my neck out either," he observed. "Them as want to fight Santa Anna are welcome to it."

Cole won a few hands and lost others. He stood up after an hour.

"See you in the mornin'," Abel nodded. "Good trip, Brandon."

"Thanks," Cole said. Going out the door he saw Jose Alvarez watching him from the other end of the room. The Mexican had probably been there for quite some time. His cigarette was burned half way down.

It was nearly dusk outside. Cole heard the heavy steps behind him. He stopped. Tolivar Simms staggered down the walk.

"I was waitin' for you, Brandon," the giant grinned drunkenly. "Where do we go next?"

Cole smiled. There were still a few minor details to attend to before the morning start. He'd ordered two hundred pounds of coffee which had not been delivered from the Mills' General Store.

"Go down to the wagons," he told the giant. "Tell Mat Stewart you're signed up. He'll make you a bunk in the wagons." He paused. "Tell Stewart to keep five men on guard around the wagons all the time. He's to shoot anyone who comes near."

Tolivar Simms lumbered away like a great St. Bernard dog. Cole Brandon grinned after him. Simms would be worth his weight in gold before the trip was over. Cole had met his kind on the trail before—big, shiftless, honest men, reckless, heavy-drinking. They would give their lives for the men in whom they had placed their trust.

II

IT took another hour's wrangling with Job Mills before the coffee was being trundled down to the waiting wagons. Mills had been short of the beans. Two hundred pounds represented his entire stock.

"Where in hell are you goin', Brandon?" the business man grumbled. "You won't need more than a hundred pounds down to Santa Fe?"

"Might trade some of it," Cole grinned. "I pay cash, Job. I need that coffee." He had purchased extra quantities of all the other commodities — flour, blackstrap sorghum, sowbelly. "I'm taking a bigger crew this time," Cole explained it.

He had to pass the Culver House on the way down to the river. It was now nearly nine o'clock, Jose Alvarez came out of the side door and hesitated before crossing the road.

Cole saw the short man step from a nearby doorway, rifle in hand. It was dark in the shadow of the buildings and the man with the rifle hadn't seen or heard the trader coming down the walk.

Alvarez stepped into the gutter and started toward the other side. The rifleman lifted his weapon. He drew a bead on the unsuspecting victim, following him with a rifle.

Cole Brandon hesitated for a brief instant. He recognized the man with the rifle. It was the bouncer whom Alvarez had shot in the arm. He'd promised retribution and this was his way of carrying out his threat.

Remembering how the Mexican had interfered in his behalf in the afternon, he felt ashamed. Alvarez was no greaser from Santa Fe. He was a blue-blooded Mexican from the interior—an aristocrat.

Cole leaped forward. He struck the arm of the assassin as the rifle cracked. The bullet went high. Alvarez whirled around, the small pistol gleaming in his hand.

Cole Brandon knocked the bouncer down into the gutter. The rifle flew out of his hands. The man yelled and tried to free himself. The trader's iron fists smashed once, twice—three times. The bouncer lay still on the ground.

There was a flood of light on the walk as the front door of the Culver House bar opened and men tumbled out. Alvarez walked swiftly toward the two men on the ground.

Cole stood up. He picked the rifle from the ground and tossed it to a blanketed

Indian standing on the walk. The redman grinned and hastened away with his new possession.

"I heard the bullet," Jose Alvarez said simply. "I owe you my life, *Señor* Brandon."

Cole Brandon saw the worry in the Mexican's face and he had an inkling what it meant. Alvarez was a gentleman; he did not like the business in which he was engaged.

"Forget it," Cole said gruffly. "It was a debt I owed." He heard the window close above him. Glancing up quickly, he caught a glimpse of a woman's face in the dusk. It was too dark to see clearly. He remembered that Jose Alvarez and his sister were staying in the hotel.

Someone threw a pail of water on the prostrate bouncer and the crowd dispersed. Cole Brandon strode toward the wagons. He saw the fires twinkling in the grove. A sentry loomed up in front of him and Cole Brandon nodded in approval.

"That you, Mat?" he called softly.

"Come on in, boss," Mat Stewart drawled. "Where in hell did you get that hombre?" Beyond, they could hear the boisterous voice of Tolivar Simms lifted in song.

"We'll need men like him," Cole Brandon smiled, "before we get through with this business, Mat."

The blocky New Englander with the bald head and the short whiskers nodded. Cole had had him on one of the Brandon Conestogas for eight years. Mat Stewart was a man to be trusted.

"Reckon we're all set to go in the mornin'," Stewart growled. "There's nigh a hundred wagons takin' the trail, Cole."

"It'll be a big outfit," Cole Brandon agreed. "At least there'll be no trouble from the Indians."

"It's white men I'm worried about," Stewart said. "Men like Lee Abel and Blane Cordell."

Cole didn't tell the wagoner about Jose Alvarez. Stewart had enough to worry about on this trip.

"I'm staying with the wagons tonight," he said. "We'll get the jump on the others before dawn. We won't take anybody's dust if we don't have to."

Mat Stewart spat into the darkness. "Reckon there ain't anybody's goin' to start nuthin' till we're well out on the trail," he stated.

Cole Brandon found a blanket and bedroll in one of the wagons and placed it on top of the rifle cases. In the morning, as usual, there would be a general scramble to get away from the town. There would be no order in the march. Groups of wagons and carriages would leave independently, bound for Council Grove one hundred and forty-five miles away. At the Grove they would organize into a body, a wagon boss would be elected; there would be the regulation trail laws, much bickering, and hogsheads full of strong liquor consumed.

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning when the rifle cracked and Cole Brandon shook off the blanket and leaped out of the wagon. The night was clear and crisp with a sky full of stars.

Another rifle cracked and a man yelled in pain. Distinctly, Cole heard the quick clatter of horse's hoofs. Mat Stewart raced up on foot.

"Who was it?" Cole called sharply. He had the Walker Colt out, hammer back.

"Don't know," the wagoner gasped. "Jeff Tolan sparked him, but he got away. Reckon he was thinkin' of peepin' into those cases, Cole."

Cole Brandon laughed harshly. "People are curious," he snapped. "They'll be worrying about these cases all the time we're on the trail. But the rifles are going through, Mat—all the way."

"Sure," Stewart agreed. "You know how I feel, boss."

There was no use going to sleep again. At three o'clock the wagoners ate a hasty meal and brought the mules in from the nearby meadow. Light was showing in the east when the first Brandon Conestoga rolled out onto the trail. In the second wagon Tolivar Simms snored like a buzz saw.

"I better wake him up now," Mat Stewart growled. "He'll let the whole city know we're goin'."

"Let him sleep," Cole advised. "He'll be a better man when he awakens. And he'll get no more liquor on the trail." Riding his own big dapple gray, he trotted along beside the lead wagon. Peering through the dusk, he saw other vehicles being hauled up from the river bottom.

By morning the plains would be alive with sweating, swearing men; between four and six hundred mules and horses would drag the overloaded wagons onto the trail. There would be fights and possibly knife play for positions. A few men would be hurt. Then the silence would reign, unbroken till the next caravan hit the trail —and there probably would be no more.

THE ten Brandon Conestogas were the first wagons on the trail and Cole was satisfied. He usually had his wagons moving first; the other traders expected it. When Cole Brandon took the trail, they knew it was time to roll.

Tolivar Simms was awake when the sun came over the horizon. Cole saw him sitting in the second wagon calling to his mules, at peace with the world. The giant waved a cheery hand and Cole moved up toward him.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Reckon I could stand a drink," Simms grinned.

"Coffee," Cole told him, "is all our drivers get to drink on the trail. Better get used to it, Simms."

"Damn," the giant growled. "You're a hard man, Brandon."

"I aim to be," Cole grinned.

Tolivar Simms grumbled something under his breath. In another moment he broke out into a song of the Cumberland Road. Cole Brandon listened and nodded in satisfaction. They had ten drivers and ten helpers, a total of twenty men, to guard the six hundred rifles. They could have used more because there would be opposition later on, but Cole wouldn't have been sure of the others. Simms had been an exception.

At noon a group of riders spurred past the slowly-moving wagons. Cole saw Ted Bigby among the group. Bigby stared at him and then turned away. The mountain man's group were going to Santa Fe, eventually to fight with the Texans for independence. Cole Brandon was out for the dollar.

"They'll be campin' on Elk Creek," Mat Stewart observed. "Bigby is goin' with Ben Radan's outfit. They'll drink more liquor, afore they git to Santa Fe, than the whole caravan put together."

Cole Brandon nodded. It would pay to stay clear of Bigby as much as possible. He wasn't afraid of the big trapper, but Bigby would be asking embarrassing questions—questions he couldn't answer under the circumstances.

It was late in the afternoon when Cole gave the signal to halt. They were alone on the open plains. Dead ahead was a clump of cottonwood. From past experience he knew a stream ran in among the trees.

Mat Stewart came up and glanced back. The caravan was broken wide open. Groups of wagons were strewn along fifteen miles of the trail. The more timid would stick together; the experienced traders realized there would be no danger from hostiles until they were past Council Grove. Occasionally, the Comanches kicked up a fuss, but more often they came to beg or trade, or steal.

"Reckon you better ride back with me, Brandon," Stewart said quietly. "We picked up a passenger along the way."

"Passenger?" Cole stared.

"Second wagon from the last," the wagoner said laconically. "Found her stowed away beneath the blanket rolls."

Cole Brandon turned the gray and trotted back along the line of rumbling wagons. The girl was sitting up on the front seat with the driver. She was Mexican, olive-tinted complexion, dark blue-black hair, lustrous brown eyes. She smiled when he came up, revealing a set of flashing white teeth.

"How did you get into the wagons?" Cole demanded. He already knew. During the excitement of the past night, when Stewart and the sentinels were chasing the intruder, she must have walked in unmolested.

"I have heard of your good heart, *Señor* Brandon," she said. "I must get back home to Santa Fe and I have not the money to pay for the trip." She spoke English without a trace of accent.

The trader looked at Mat Stewart hunched in his saddle. A relief driver was handling the wagoner's team.

"You will not send me back, *Señor* Brandon?" she pleaded. "When the war comes I might have to stay for years."

Cole Brandon smiled. "People keep forgetting," he reminded her, "that it's not a

war betwen the United States and Mexico. Texas is a Mexican colony."

"The Americanos do not like the Mexicans," the girl said slowly. "You are aware of that, *Señor* Brandon?"

Cole nodded. There had been trouble during the past weeks with Mexicans in Independence. They had been moving out of the town as war between the Texans and the Mexican Government became more imminent.

"My father in Santa Fe will pay you well," the girl continued.

Cole Brandon opened his mouth to venture that it was a strange thing she should be penniless in the town when her father in Santa Fe was well able to pay her way. She did not speak like the *señoritas* he'd seen in Santa Fe. Half of them knew no English; the others spoke it indifferently. The Santa Fe girls were painted, be-rouged. This girl had breeding.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Juanita," she told him. "Juanita Gomez. My father—"

Cole Brandon turned the gray toward the head of the column. There was a half smile on his face. He had been trying to remember where he'd seen her before. It had been vaguely familiar, like something he'd seen in a dream. But it hadn't been a dream. Juanita Gomez had looked down at him from the window in the Culver House last night!

"You can stay with us part of the way," the trader said. "You will remember that this is not a coach."

Mat Stewart was shaking his head as they rode away. "We could have one o' the men take her back to Independence in a couple of hours," he said.

"She can stay for a while," Cole stated briefly. "We can always pay her way and turn her over to one of the other wagons when we have to." He realized that by sending the girl back it would immediately arouse Jose Alvarez's suspicions, and the slim Mexican was more to be feared than Lee Abel and his cut-throats. Alvarez had sent the girl to spy on him. The logical procedure was to keep Alvarez in doubt—all the way.

Tolivar Simms' booming voice called the alarm. In the half-dusk, a line of riders trotted out of the cottonwood grove a hundred yards ahead.

"Indians!" Mat Stewart gaped. "What in hell are they doin' here?"

III

THE Indians, naked to the waist, entirely unlike the half-civilized Delawares living in the vicinity of Independence, galloped their mounts straight toward the wagons.

There was no need to give any signals. Cole Brandon knew his drivers could be depended upon to do the right thing. Already, the lead wagon was whirling and driving back toward the rear Conestoga, forming a semi-circle.

The Indians, about thirty or forty in number, opened fire at fifty yards. They came on yelling shrilly. Cole Brandon heard the bullets whistle over his head.

Mat Stewart and the wagoners were on the ground. One man held the mules, pulling the lead animals in toward the centr of the circle. Others returned the fire of the Indians from behind each wagon.

"First time in my life I ever heard of the devils attackin' a train one day out o' Independence," Mat Stewart growled.

A blast of fire from the wagoners emptied three Indian saddles. Tolivar Simms roared with delight. A band of the attackers swept up close to the wagons, pouring in a heavy fire. One of the white men went down. Cole Brandon saw the giant Simms suddenly dart out from behind a wagon and drag one of the Indians from the saddle. The wagoner's powerful fist formed an arc in the air. The Indian screamed and fell to the ground with a broken cheekbone.

Cole emptied his Walker at the encircling riders and then raced for one of the wagons. The attackers seemed to be surprised by the well-organized resistance of the wagoners. Ordinarily, at this early stage of the trip, there would have been confusion and panic.

"I reckon they got enough," Mat Stewart said. Cole watched him run over and help one of the wagoners from the ground. The man had been hit in the shoulder. His shirt was staining red.

Already, the Indians were streaking away across the plains, leaving five of their number behind.

"They ain't Comanches or Kiowas,"

Stewart observed. "I've run up against them before, an' so have you, Cole."

Cole Brandon nodded. When the Comanche wanted to fight, he put up a battle. The loss of a few men wouldn't deter him. The cowardly group which had ridden from the grove were not true plains Indians.

Tolivar Simms was bending over the Indian he'd hit when Cole walked up to him. The giant was grinning foolishly.

"Must o' hit him a little too hard, Brandon," he said. "He ain't breathin'."

Cole bent down. The Indian's face was misshapen from the terrific blow. The shock had killed him.

"What is he?" Mat Stewart asked.

"Delaware," Cole replied. "They were probably organized in town." He looked sharply at the wagoner. "I heard Pete Santon is part Delaware."

Stewart nodded. "Reckon he got a lot o' his relatives together; maybe he had to pull a lot of 'em out o' the gutter." The wagoner smiled coldly. "If it was Santon, then Abel was behind the whole thing."

Jeff Tolan, the tall rangy Missourian, came back to make a report. "One of 'em's runnin' away on foot," he chuckled. "Three are stone dead, Brandon. This hombre makes four."

"We have one wounded," Stewart reflected. "I don't figger they'll come again, Cole."

Cole Brandon saw the Mexican girl cutting the wounded man's shirt away.

"If someone can take out the bullet," Juanita Gomez said quietly. "I'll do the rest."

Jeff Tolan lighted one of the pitch pine flares and sterilized a knife blade in it.

"I'm the doctor," the wagoner grinned, "an' Bill Oldman's my friend."

After the operation, they wheeled the wagon closer to the grove and men scattered for fire wood. In a few minutes half dozen fires were going. Cole watched the girl preparing coffee over his own fire. She was efficient; she had not lost her head in the raid.

The trader sat down on one of the wagon tongues. He made designs in the earth with a stick. On the trail he'd met few girls; he'd been too busy building up the trade. In Santa Fe he avoided the loose-living *señoritas* from the dance halls. Meeting a girl like Juanita was an experience. Remembering the business at hand, he knew he had to forget it. It was a pity, too, that Jose Alvarez's sister bore no resemblance whatsoever to him!

IN THE NEXT few days the wagons drew closer together on the road to Council Grove. Jose Alvarez trotted up on a white horse and smiled his greeting to Cole Brandon. The trader watched the Mexican's black eyes searching each wagon as he came down the line.

"Morning," Cole nodded. Juanita Gomez was sitting up on the seat of the third wagon in line. She looked at Jose but gave no sign that she had recognized him.

"You are moving fast, *Señor* Brandon," Alvarez said. "The nearest wagon is three miles back."

"They'll catch up at the Grove," Cole explained. "We figure on cutting a stack of axle trees. Ten wagons can use up a lot of axles." He looked at his horse's ears. "You shouldn't be riding so far ahead of your wagon, *Señor* Alvarez," he said. "It is not safe for your sister."

Alvarez smiled apologetically. "She did not come," he said. "I wanted you to meet her, *Señor* Brandon. She is staying with her aunt in Independence." The Mexican's dark eyes flashed back toward the wagon in which the girl sat. "You are taking a girl with you, *Señor?*" he asked.

"We found her in the wagon," Cole said. "Stowaway. She was stranded in town."

"You are taking her to Santa Fe?" Jose asked.

Cole Brandon inclined his head. He was sure Alvarez would be around quite frequently to see how the girl was making out. She would find ways of communicating to him whatever she was able to learn.

JOSE Alvarez rode with them for an hour and then turned back. They reached Council Grove on a Saturday afternoon. Cole Brandon lifted himself in the saddle to see the dark green oasis of trees rising up from the barren plain. Council Grove was a phenomenon of the plains — hardwood trees sprouting where few or no trees grew.

In another two hours they had pitched camp and had the mules grazing out on the plain a mile away. Mat Stewart sent a dozen men into the woods with axes, Tolivar Simms was at the head of them. The giant was rapidly proving himself a leader. The other wagoners approved of his genial good nature and willingness to work.

In the late afternon and following morning the remainder of the caravan came in. Jose Alvarez trotted his white horse beside a rickety wagon owned by two peons. He waved cheerily as they made camp.

Lee Abel, Blane Cordell and Pete Santon had their outfits packed in one of the traders' wagons. They had no vehicle of their own.

"They're travelin' light and fast," Mat Stewart told Cole Brandon as the three came toward the grove.

"Look at Santon's arm," Cole whispered. The dark-skinned man with the Indian features had his right arm in a sling. "I'm wondering where he got that," the trader murmured.

Abel was riding a buckskin animal with a taffy-colored mane. He pulled up beside the fire at which Cole was sitting. The gambler's snake eyes watched Juanita Gomez moving around in front of the flames broiling a beef steak Cole had cut from one of the animals they'd butchered the third day out.

"Didn't know you were bringin' your woman along," Abel chuckled. "You kin pick 'em, Brandon."

Cole's eyes stopped on Santon's arm. "Have an accident, Pete?" he asked.

The breed's thin lips tightened. He forced a grin. "Damned gun went off when I was cleanin' it," he stated.

"Careless," Cole Brandon smiled. He turned to Abel. "You heard we had a little run-in with a bunch of Delawares?"

Lee Abel nodded. His eyes narrowed. He said nothing.

"Killed four of them," Cole said carelessly. "One of my boys crashed in the skull of a young buck with his fist. I'm carrying twenty men, Abel, and all of them know how to shoot."

Lee Abel leaned forward in the saddle. "You're tellin' me, Brandon," he snapped. "Why?"

Cole Brandon dropped a stick of wood on the fire. "Thought you might like to know, Abel," he said easily.

"You must have a damned precious lot o' stuff on your wagons," Lee Abel observed.

"Rifles," Cole said slowly. "Six hundred of them." He recognized the fact that it was no longer worthwhile trying to deceive the gambler. Lee Abel knew the value of the guns; he'd discovered the contents of the oak cases and had taken the trail to await his chance. A man could make a fortune in Santa Fe with six hundred of the latest rifles from the States.

His frankness discomfited Abel.

"Figgerin' on makin' a last clean-up before the war?" the gambler asked. "Reckon Santa Anna's governor kin use 'em. Mebbe *El Presidente* himself would like to outfit his troops."

Cole shrugged. Like Alvarez, Abel was curious as to the destination of the munitions. The Mexican could wait till the cargo arrived in Santa Fe. Abel was defeated once the wagons pulled into the trading center.

"The rifles are already ordered," he said quietly, "and they'll be delivered, Abel."

"I ain't stoppin' em," the gambler grinned. "I got my own business in Santa Fe, Brandon."

Cole Brandon nodded. "Thought you might like to know, Abel," he said grimly. "I'm killing any man who interferes with this shipment." He saw Juanita Gomez's face as she passed in front of the fire. It was pale and her lips were bloodless.

Lee Abel laughed harshly. He looked at the squat figure of Blane Cordell sitting motionless on a bay animal.

"Reckon I done a little killin' on my own, Brandon," he snapped. "I don't take any bluffs."

"Stay away from my wagons," Cole said quietly, "or we'll find out whether it's a bluff."

The three rode away to water their mounts in the nearby stream.

MAT STEWART glanced up at the sky and shook his head. It had been a clear day, but late in the afternoon heavy black clouds had moved in from the west. The sun had disappeared and they could hear the wind murmuring in the treetops.

"It'll be a blow," the wagoner observed.

"I'd better see that everything is tied down, Cole."

Wagon after wagon rattled into the grove as the skies darkened and the wind rose. Cole sent two more men out to watch the mules. Tarpaulins were tightened on each wagon. The drivers fixed up shelters beneath the Conestogas by lashing extra tarps to windward.

As the first drops of rain splashed into their faces Cole lifted the Mexican girl into one of the wagons and fastened the opening. Lightning flashed in the west, followed by a rumble of thunder. Huge drops of water splattered the dry ground.

Cole glanced out across the plain to where the mules were grazing. There were six men working the herd. Mat Stewart came up. He shook his head.

"I'd like to see 'em all hobbled an' tied down," the wagoner grunted. "No tellin' what they'll do if a bolt o' lightning strikes in the middle of 'em. You know how they kin run, Cole."

Cole Brandon nodded. There was no time to hobble a hundred head of mules. Besides, mules were known to run almost as fast with hobbles on as without them. If the storm did not get too bad, the herders could probably handle them.

They could no longer see the mules out on the plain now. A mist was sweeping across the prairie. It hit them a moment later, a blinding wall of rain, out of which the lightning flashed with increasing fury. Both men dived beneath the wagon. Cole Brandon caught a glimpse of a rider shooting out of the grove about fifty yards away. The figure was indistinct in the darkness. He promptly forgot about it. Probably some trader was hurrying out to look after his stock.

"If they break out there," Mat Stewart mumbled, "we'll have a hell of a time roundin' 'em up, Cole. Them long-eared devils kin run all the way back to Independence."

Both men heard the pistol shot at the same time. It came from the direction of the mule herd. Mat Stewart's mouth opened.

"What damn fool is shootin' off a gun?" he snarled. "That ain't no way to keep a herd o' mules together in a storm."

Cole Brandon pushed aside the tarpaulin and peered out through the wheel spokes. It was impossible to see anything in the darkness. The wind had risen to an eerie pitch. They could hear it screaming through the treetops all around them.

Mat Stewart was breathing heavily. "If they run now, Cole," he said slowly, "there ain't no use o' worryin' till the storm's over. You couldn't foller and you couldn't find them brutes."

Brandon had to agree.

Five minutes later a horse raced up to the wagon. Jeff Tolan's moist face was pushed in under the covering. The wagoner's eyes were hard.

"They're gone," he said quietly, "every damn one of 'em, Brandon."

"Who fired the shot?" Cole asked.

Tolan shook his head. "Some hombre rode right through the middle of 'em. It was too dark to git a good look at him, Cole. Looked like a bay horse though."

"Bay horse?" Cole Brandon stared at Mat Stewart. They both knew that Pete Santon had ridden a bay animal. "You wouldn't be sure, Jeff?" Cole asked.

"Reckon not," Tolan said regretfully. "It were too dark, boss." He paused. "We might o' been able to hold 'em," he added.

Cole nodded. "Tell the men to come in," he ordered. "We'll start after them as soon as the rain stops."

"It'll be night then," Mat Stewart said. "Reckon we'll have to wait till mornin', Cole." Jeff Tolan nodded his head in agreement.

Cole Brandon stared at the two. By morning the hundred mules would be scattered all over the plains, and no one could tell how far they would run. Without the mules, the rifles would rust in the cases.

"Bring the boys in," he said again and Tolan went out. He turned to Stewart. "You think Abel was in on this?"

Mat Stewart laughed shortly. "Who else would want to hold up your shipment?" he asked.

Cole Brandon thought of Jose Alvarez. The Mexican would be a fool to interfere at this stage. Alvarez was still in a quandry as to the destination of the guns. That left Abel.

"We'll look him up in the morning," Cole said grimly, "after we've made the round-up."

"I'm thinkin' he'll look you up, Cole," Stewart chuckled. "See if I'm not right."

THE storm broke at eight o'clock that night. The sun came out for a few minutes, bathing the wet plains with a brilliant light. Night fell swiftly after this brief return of the sun.

In the morning Cole Brandon rode out with a dozen men. The rain had wiped out all tracks but Tolivar Simms was sure the mules had broken toward the east.

In pairs the twelve men scattered across the wide plain. There were a thousand depressions, groves of trees, and dried riverbeads in which groups of mules could be hidden.

Cole Brandon teamed up with the giant Simms. They rode till high noon before finding any of the mules. Simms spotted three of them in a patch of cottonwood. They had little difficulty driving the stampeded animals back to Council Grove.

"Hope the other boys had more luck," the giant boomed. "Reckon we'll never git these wagons into Santa Fe."

Cole Brandon kept his eyes on the mules trotting up ahead of them. "Suppose we weren't going to Santa Fe, Simms," he said quietly.

Simms blinked. "Taos?" he asked.

"No," Cole grinned. "Further."

"There ain't nuthin' beyond Santa Fe," Simms objected, "'ceptin' Texas territory and Mexico." He paused. "Where in hell you takin' these wagons, Brandon?"

Cole Brandon smiled. "There's a man in this train would give a lot to know," he replied. "My men are signed up to go wherever I take them, Simms. They won't object. How about you?"

The giant's face cracked into a grin. "This outfit suits me," he chuckled. "I'll go straight to hell with it."

"You might end up there," Cole Brandon told him, "before it's over."

"I reckon I'll take plenty o' men with me," Simms said.

They found Mat Stewart with four of the other mule chasers back at the grove. Stewart had picked up eight mules. At seven o'clock that night the others straggled in with a dozen more.

Cole Brandon sat in silence before the fire. He felt Mat Stewart's eyes on him.

"We're missin' about seventy-five mules," the wagoner pointed out. "This outfit don't move with two dozen animals, Cole."

"No," Cole Brandon said. Independence was a hundred and forty-five miles away and there weren't more than a half-dozen mules in the whole town now that the caravan had pulled out. They had to find the remaining mules or stop.

Tolivar Simms sat on a log nearby, whittling. Cole watched him a moment. Then he smiled.

"Stick around, Simms," he advised. "There might be a little work." He remembered how the giant had crushed the Delaware's skull with his fist. The man could probably break a mule's neck with his bare hands. Cole turned to Mat Stewart. "Tell Lee Abel I'm ready to see him," he said softly.

Stewart licked his lips. He walked away. Abel and Blane Cordell came into the firelight a fe wminutes later. There was a grin on the gambler's narrow face.

"You want to see me, Brandon?" he asked.

Cole nodded, his face expressionless. "I'd like my mules, Abel," he said quietly.

"What mules?" the gambler countered. The squat Cordell stood beside him, thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt.

"I lost seventy-five mules in the storm last night," Cole continued blandly. "They were run off by a man riding a bay animal. We've made a search for them and have only been able to pick up two dozen. You have the others hidden somewhere between here and Independnce."

Lee Abel laughed. "Why in hell should I want your mules, Brandon?" he demanded. "Mule-stealin' ain't my game."

"Rifles are," Cole said.

Lee Abel's rattlesnake eyes glittered. "You're bluffin', Brandon," he snapped, "an' you're wastin' my time."

"The mules are no good to you," Cole Brandon said, "and the rifles are no good to me without the mules."

Blane Cordell moistened his lips. "He's askin' fer a deal, Lee," the gunman grinned. "Maybe we could help him find those mules."

Abel laughed. "If we could pick up your mules, Brandon," he asked, "what's in it?"

Cole Brandon rubbed his hands as he sat on the log near the fire. "You have the mules, Abel," he said flatly, "and you can bring them in whenever you want to."

"Then fer how much?" Abel snarled. "If you know all about it."

"Name a price," Cole said.

"Half interest in them rifles," the gambler said. "You put it down in writin'."

Cole Brandon nodded. He reached inside his pocket, keeping his eyes on Blane Cordell at the same time. Cordell's right hand moved as the trader came out with the Walker .44 in his hand. He held it on Cordell's middle.

"Take their guns, Simms," he said quietly. Blane Cordell's hands went up. Lee Abel had whipped open his coat and had the six-shooter half out of the holster when Mat Stewart's brittle voice came from the darkness.

"Drop it, Abel," the wagoner said grimly.

Tolivar Simms slid the Bowie knife into the right boot and came lazily to his feet. He took away both guns.

"You have nothing on us," Abel snarled. "Quit the bluff, Brandon."

"I need those mules," Cole said slowly. "You'll never know how much, Abel. I said I'd kill anyone who got in my way."

"A hell of a lot o' good it'll do," Cordell said, "if we're dead. You don't have the mules anyhow."

Cole Brandon smiled. "There are ways of dying, Blane," he said, "like lying out on the open plain with wrists, arms and legs broken. It's not nice."

Lee Abel's face went gray. "You ain't tryin' nuthin," he said hoarsely.

Cole pointed to Blane Cordell. "Knock the little one down," he told the giant.

Cordell spun around just as Tolivar Simms' huge fist hit him on the jaw. He crumpled to the ground.

"Can you break a man's arm?" Cole asked the giant.

Simms grinned. "I kin break a man's back," he said cheerfully, "like it was a pipestem. Once I done it."

Cole Brandon nodded. "Take Abel with you. Start with his wrists—both of them. Take him a few miles away so they won't hear him. If he tells you where the mules are, you can stop."

The giant gripped Lee Abel by the collar and twisted him around. He choked off the gambler's scream of terror and dragged him as if he were a rag doll toward the horse.

Cole Brandon stared into the fire. "Both wrists," he said slowly, "and then both arms—."

Juanita Gomez stood before him. "You can't do this," she cried. "It's not human!"

Cole looked at her calmly. "We didn't ask you to come," he reminded her.

The butt of a brown cigarette made an arc through the air and landed in the fire. Jose Alvarez spoke from the shadows.

"I do not mean to intrude, *Señor* Brandon," he said softly. "I have overheard most of the conversation. If you will permit me, my peon will take you to your mules."

IV

COLE blinked. "You know where they are?" he asked.

"My peon," Alvarez corrected him. "He ran across a herd of mules hidden in a coulee eighteen miles from here." The Mexican dandy smiled coldly. "My peon was looking for his own mule which had run off."

Cole Brandon nodded. "Can you direct us to the mules?" he asked.

"With pleasure," Alvarez grinned.

"Take ten men," Cole said to Mat Stewart. Tolivar Simms gave Abel a shove and the gambler fell in front of the fire. His face was still white and his lips were clenched.

"I reckon I won't forget this," Abel hissed. Blane Cordell was stirring on the ground.

"Give him his gun," Cole said to the giant. He stood up and placed the Walker back in the holster.

Simms grimaced. He took Abel's gun from his belt and shoved it into the gambler's holster.

"Any time," Cole Brandon said easily. He stood with his legs braced wide apart, hands hanging at his sides, the long frock coat open and the gun clear.

Lee Abel climbed to his feet. Jose Alvarez leaned against the nearby wagon and lit a brown cigarette. The pearl buttons on his jacket gleamed in the firelight.

The gambler stared at the men around him. Simms was ten feet away; Mat Stewart waited on the other side.

"You got me set up," Abel accused.

"I'm the only man drawing a gun here,"

Cole Brandon said. "You hear that, Stewart?"

The wagoner grumbled under his breath.

"Make a play, Abel," Cole said.

The gambler stiffened. He glanced at the silent man fifteen feet away. A man could not miss at that distance. There was a half-smile on Cole Brandon's face; his body was entirely free of tension.

"I'll see you around, Brandon," Abel said gruffly. He moved out of the firelight.

Tolivar Simms gave Blane Cordell a kick as he got to his feet and the dazed gunman staggered after his comrade.

Jose Alvarez clapped his hands in appreciation of the little playlet just enacted.

"You are one cool hombre, *Señor* Brandon," Alvarez smiled.

"You either stay cool," Cole said slowly, "or you die in this country." He watched Mat Stewart ride up with his escort.

"We're ready," the wagoner said.

Alvarez nodded. He walked through the trees toward his own wagon and came back a moment later with a greasy peon wrapped in a faded purple serape.

"Pablo will take you to your mules," he said. "There is one man guarding them."

"If it's Santon," Stewart growled, "we'll shoot his damned ears off."

They came back in the morning with the seventy-five mules. Stewart told his story before the berakfast fire. His face was drawn with fatigue.

"Whoever was herdin' 'em," he said slowly, "got away before we arrived. Maybe he heard us comin', an' maybe there was no one there to begin with."

'Simms saw Santon ride in this morning on a lathered horse," Cole Brandon observed. "Better get some rest, Mat."

Mat Stewart looked at the trader curiously. "Reckon you wouldn't have had Abel's bones broken, would you, Cole?" he asked.

Cole Brandon's lips were tight. "What do you think, Mat?"

WITH most of the wagons already well supplied with extra axle trees, the voting began in earnest, preceded as usual by drinking bouts and electioneering.

"Some o' these damn fools will use any excuse to git drunk," Mat Stewart rasped as a half-dozen wagoners staggered by the Brandon Conestogas. "You'd think they were electin' the President o' the United States instead of a wagon boss."

Cole Brandon nodded. He'd been on eight or nine treks across the plains and three times the company had elected him wagon boss. It was an empty honor. Aside from prescribing the line of march, the stops, and settling a few trivial quarrels, the wagon boss had no more power than any other trader. In any kind of emergency, the power of the boss would be flouted and a decision would be made by a meeting of the men.

Still the company went about the election with the reckless abandon of the frontiersman to whom an election of any officer was a signal event. The privilege of voting was still a comparatively recent innovation.

Mat Stewart pointed to the group of mountain men and Independence bums grouped around Bigby, the trapper. Lee Abel and Blane Cordell were in the bunch.

"I don't like it," the wagoner grunted. "Abel and Bigby are too thick. I'm thinkin' the gambler is makin' his next move, Cole."

Cole Brandon watched the bunch. Bigby was talking in his usual loud voice. He was drunk again and Cole was a little surprised. On the trail the mountain man had always kept himself on the alert.

"Abel is feedin' him liquor from his own store," Stewart explained. "Bigby's campaignin' for the wagon-boss job an' Abel is backin' him."

"Why?" Cole asked. He knew that Lee Abel and Ted Bigby had never been close friends in Independence.

"You figger it out," Stewart laughed coldly. "Bigby has about fifty votes already from that mob he's brought with him. He should get the job without a fight."

Cole nodded. Several of the traders had asked him if he would run and he'd turned them down. He had one job to do—one thought in mind.

The voting started that night around a huge campfire built on the edge of the grove. There were two candidates besides Bigby. The voting was closed with pieces of paper distributed and the candidate's name written down by each voter.

Cole Brandon stood at the edge of the

crowd with Mat Stewart and Tolivar Simms.

"Bigby was a friend o' mine one time," Stewart muttered, "but I ain't givin' him no vote this election."

Others would. The big mountain man was boisterously drunk but he knew the trail and he was a fighter. Men would listen to him, drunk or sober.

Cole Brandon cast his vote for Tom Doyle, one of the veteran traders on the trail. Doyle received eighteen votes, Fred Haley, the third candidate, received thirteen, Bigby a hundred and fifty.

Lee Abel wheeled in a keg of liquor and knocked in the plug. The crowd yelled and pushed up closer. Bigby had broken into song.

Cole Brandon turned around and started for the wagons. He saw the squat figure of Blane Cordell leaning against a nearby tree. There was a triumphant expression on the fat gunman's face. It turned to hatred as he looked into the eyes of the trader.

"The boot's on the other foot, Brandon," Cordell rasped. "Let's see you set the dogs on us now."

Cole laughed in his face. Tolivar Simms held a huge fist under the fat man's flabby chin.

"Bullets are faster than fists, you damned hulk," Cordell grated. "I ain't forgettin' you."

Mat Stewart grasped the giant's arm. "You fool with us, Cordell," the wagoner said quietly, "an' you'll be bitin' off a bigger chunk than you kin chew."

As they neared their own wagons, Cole saw a figure slip away through the trees. Juanita Gomez waited for him outside his own Conestoga.

"We leave at dawn," Cole said briefly. He made no mention of the visitor the girl had had. Jose Alvarez had come seeking information. Several times Cole had noticed Juanita in the vicinity when he was talking to Stewart. He'd seen her conversing with the wounded Oldman. There was little the Mexican girl could get from the drivers. Only Stewart knew the destination of the six hundred rifles, and the wagoner wouldn't talk.

"When do we reach Santa Fe?" Juanita asked.

Cole shrugged. *"Quien sabe,"* he said slowly.

THEY were off at dawn with a sober, sullen Ted Bigby riding at the head of the four columns of wagons. Cole Brandon's ten Conestogas had been given the rear position in the right flank line. They had to take the dust from the others for the first part of the trip.

Several times during the morning Cole rode up ahead and saw Lee Abel talking to Bigby. They rode their mounts side by side, and for once the mountain man was on the listening end.

"I was thinkin'," Mat Stewart said that night. "Abel is still after these guns. Bigby is movin' south when we hit Santa Fe. He's takin' his fifty bums with him. Half of 'em don't even have rifles. If Bigby could ride into the Texas settlements with six hundred guns they'd make him a general."

Cole Brandon smiled. "You believe Abel and Bigby are going to make a play for the guns before we reach Santa Fe?"

"On the trail," Stewart observed, "they kin do plenty. When they git to Santa Fe, the provincial government steps in, an' the government in Santa Fe is Mexican."

Cole nodded. It was a foregone conclusion that the topic of the conversations between Bigby and Abel was the rifles in the oak cases. Bigby wouldn't hesitate to take them if he thought they would help the cause of independence in Texas.

"If they want these rifles," Cole said quietly, "they'll have to fight for them." He knew that Bigby had over fifty men to back him, besides Abel, Cordell and Santon. If it came to a showdown, the mountain man's force would outnumber his own men more than two to one. "Where do you figure Abel comes in?" he asked the wagoner.

Stewart laughed. "The gambler ain't workin' fer the Texans," he drawled. "I'd bet my hat on that. Abel will try to swing some o' Bigby's hard cases once they leave the trail. Most o' them bums don't care who they fight for as long as some one feeds 'em. They'll sell the guns to the Texans or the Mexicans, whoever pays the most fer 'em." The wagoner paused for breath. "I reckon you know who kin pay the most, Cole."

Cole Brandon smiled at the wagoner's denunciatory tones. After Abel had helped Bigby take the guns, the gambler could have his henchman Santon slip a knife into Bigby's ribs. It would be as simple as that. The gambler could then contact General Urrea's force of cavalry already said to be on the way north from Mexico City. Santa Anna would pay plenty for the rifles.

"Bigby is the cat's-paw," Stewart growled. "He's just dumb enough to work with Abel."

The wagon boss stopped at the Brandon wagons that night after they'd formed the corral. The hundred vehicles were drawn up in a rough quadrangle and the most valuable stock herded inside the enclosure. The remaining animals were grazed just outside the wagon corral.

Bigby wiped his big hands on his buckskin shirt. Cole Brandon sipped coffee from a tin cup and waited for the wagon boss to speak. Mat Stewart and Tolivar Simms were close at hand.

"There's talk," the mountain man rumbled, "that you ain't goin' on to Santa Fe with us, Brandon. What about it?"

Cole set the cup on a rock. "It's none of your business, Bigby," he said quietly, "how far I'm going with the train."

"I been elected wagon boss," Bigby said belligerently.

"Congratulations," Cole Brandon told him.

Bigby's mouth opened and the anger showed in his blue eyes. "There's talk, Brandon," he went on, "that you're carryin' a load o' rifles fer the Mexican army. I got a right to know about that. There ain't a damned rifle bein' delivered to the greasers while I'm head o' this outfit."

Jose Alvarez strolled up, picking his fingernails with a small silver dagger. He leaned against the wagon and listened interestedly.

"The rifles," Cole said slowly, "belong to me, Bigby. Where I'm delivering them is my business. If any man attempts to stop me, I'm going to fight. That goes for you or for Abel."

Bigby took a step forward, his face livid. "Any damned white man that'll deliver guns to them greasers ain't good enough fer my company," he said tersely.

Cole Brandon lashed out with his right fist. The blow caught the mountain man flush on the mouth. Bigby staggered back, blood pouring down his chin from the smashed lips.

Regaining his balance, he whipped the knife from his belt and rushed forward. Tolivar Simms moved in front of the mountain man like a giant shadow. Simms' left hand grasped the big trapper's knife hand and bent it back.

Bigby, six feet one, and two hundred pounds, screamed with pain. Simms maintained his grip till the knife fell from his grasp. Then he pushed the wagon boss away. Mat Stewart stepped forward and picked up the knife.

"If you got any fighting to do," Cole Brandon said quietly, "you can do it with your hands, Bigby, starting now."

Ted Bigby rubbed his chafed wrist. He looked at Simms in amazement and then at Cole Brandon.

"I said it before," Bigby mumbled. "You ain't takin' those guns into Santa Fe, an' they ain't goin' to the greasers." With that, he walked back across the enclosure.

"At least he was man enough to tell us in advance," Mat Stewart reflected. "We kin watch him now, Brandon."

Jose Alvarez sat down on a nearby wagon tongue. "There are many men interested in your guns, *Señor* Brandon," he grinned.

"Too many," Cole said. He waited till Simms and Stewart had gone away. "You seem to have lost interest, Alvarez," he added.

The Mexican dandy shrugged. "Perhaps I am only watching, *Señor* Brandon," he smiled.

"Like the cat watching the mice at play?" Cole asked. From the beginning he knew that the cool little Mexican was more dangerous than either Abel or Bigby.

"I have a buyer for your rifles in Santa Fe," Alvarez said. "Perhaps we can make a deal now."

"How much?" Cole asked.

Jose Alvarez named his figure. It was a stupendous sum. Cole Brandon went over to the fire for another cup of coffee. Juanita Gomez was watching him closely.

"It is not enough?" Alvarez asked.

"Whom do you represent?" Cole Brandon asked him.

Alvarez shrugged. "Let us say it is a

private party, *Señor,"* he retorted amiably.

"El Presidente could be a private party," Cole Brandon chuckled.

"He could be," Alvarez agreed. "It is a deal, *Señor?"*

"Not yet," Cole said. "I'd like to get other bids."

Jose Alvarez lighted a brown cigarette with a stick of burning wood from the fire. "As you will, *Señor* Brandon," he said. Cole watched him walk away.

V

FOR the first time that night an armed guard was kept in the camp. Occasional Comanche or Kiowa raids had taken horses and mules in previous trips and the traders were wary. There would be no direct Indian attack on so large a party, but the loss of the stock would be a serious blow.

Cole found himself on the first watch from dusk till midnight. On the trail no man was exempt from the watches. Mat Stewart brought him his horse and he trotted out toward the herd a quarter of a mile from the enclosure. There were six other guards around the stock.

The moon was out for an hour and then disappeared behind a bank of clouds. Cole sat on the gray horse and listened to the stamping hoofs close at hand. He could no longer see the other guards scattered around the herd.

It was an hour before midnight when he was aware of a form slinking along the ground, moving closer and closer, keeping between himself and the wagon corral.

Cole Brandon slipped the Walker from the holster. He peered into the darkness. It did not seem possible that there would be Comanches so close to Council Grove. The plains Indians hunted farther to the south.

Glancing up at the sky, he noticed that the moon would probably break through the clouds again in a few minutes. The man on the ground had to make a move before then.

Quietly, Cole dismounted and stood at the horse's head, the gun in his hand. He turned casually so that he could watch the figure crawling toward him. Then he turned away again as if he had not seen anything.

The man moving toward him had frozen. Cole watched him coming forward again till he was about ten yards away. He caught a glint of metal. The moon slid through a break in the clouds and flooded the herd. Cole Brandon heard the steps.

Whirling quickly, he leveled the Colt and squeezed the trigger. He caught a glimpse of the smooth brown face of Pete Santon. The breed had a knife in his hand.

Cole's first shot stopped the assassin in his tracks. Santon gasped in agony as he pitched forward to his knees. The slug had taken him in the middle. He lay on the ground groaning as the other herders raced up. Some of the mules had tried to break at the report of the gun but they'd been quickly pushed back.

"Indians?" one of the herders yelled.

"No," Cole said. "It's all right." He moved up and kicked the knife away from Santon's hand. The breed shuddered and then lay still.

The shot had awakened the entire camp. Men were pouring toward the group, armed and yelling loudly.

"Get them back," Cole shouted. "They'll scare the herd back into the States."

Mat Stewart appeared at his elbow. "Who was it?" the wagon boss asked quietly.

"Santon," Cole said briefly. "Tried to knife me." He lifted the body of the dead man onto the gray and walked toward the wagon corral. Ted Bigby met him before he reached the first wagon.

"Somebody shot?" the wagon boss asked.

"Friend of yours," Cole Brandon said stiffly. "Tell Lee Abel to get his man Santon." He placed the body on the ground and then walked back to the herd.

In the morning Abel made a few remarks about murder and then subsided.

"Reckon he sent Santon out," Mat Stewart snapped, "only there's no way o' provin' it, Cole."

"Whatever happens to me," Cole said, "you're to take the guns through, Mat."

The wagoner nodded. "I aim to," he said simply.

THEY spotted herds of Buffalo as they moved southward the next five days. Squads of men raced after the lumbering

animals and shot down a number of them.

"Reckon this is the real buffalo country," Stewart vouched. "The Comanches have been drivin' 'em east. We'll hit 'em by the hundreds o' thousands from now on."

They had no further trouble with Lee Abel and Cordell. The two men avoided the Brandon Conestogas. Ted Bigby was with them less.

"You figger they're givin' up?" Stewart asked.

"No," Cole Brandon said. "They'll strike before we get across the Arkansas. I'm sure of it. If Abel intends to take the wagons into Mexico, he'll have to start directly south from the river rather than go into Santa Fe."

They struck the Arkansas valley in three more days and followed the river valley for another day. The river was wide and shallow, dotted here and there with small islands.

"We usually cross at Chouteau's Island," Stewart figured, "an' we'll be there by tomorrow."

"Post a double guard tonight," Cole Brandon advised. "We'll watch every move Abel makes."

They sighted a vast herd of buffalo on the other bank of the river. Several of the party splashed across to give them chase. They came back in a few hours, saddlebags filled with red meat.

Nothing happened during the night, and at noon the next day they reached Chouteau's Island, crossing place of most Santa Fe trains. Cole Brandon stared across the expanse of shallow water. Bigby would want to take the wagons across today and be ready for an early-morning start across the dry stretches of desert land on the other side.

The first mules took to the water an hour later. The river was lower than usual, coming up only to the hubs. Cole Brandon sat on the gray horse and watched the wagons moving out into the stream. His own Conestogas were nearly last in line. Three of the wagons taken by Bigby's own battalion formed the rear guard.

"Ready?" Mat Stewart called. The first Brandon wagon was moving down the slope. On the other bank, the wagons were pulling around in a wide circle, preparatory to camping for the night.

Ted Bigby and Lee Abel waited on the opposite bank, their horses close together. The trim red and blue vehicles were dragged out into the water. Cole Brandon rode beside the lead wagon. Glancing back over his shoulder he saw the last of his Conestogas take to the water. The three dilapidated Bigby wagons had stopped. Men were walking down to the water's edge, rifles in hand.

Cole turned the gray and splashed toward Mat Stewart who had been riding behind him. At the same time a rifle cracked from the opposite bank and a bullet kicked up water ten yards to his left. It had been a warning shot.

Mat Stewart's face was white with anger. "Reckon they picked a good time, Cole," he grated.

Cole Brandon nodded grimly. Two more shots halted his first wagon. The driver peered back and Cole lifted his hand for the man to stop. The ten wagons were out in mid-stream with the water flowing past them. About twenty-five men were grouped around Abel and Bigby. They spread out and took cover as Cole wheeled back again and rode quietly toward the bank.

Behind them, the three Bigby wagons had lined up along the river's edge with two dozen riflemen crouching behind the wheels.

"Come on out, Brandon," Bigby roared, "an' come alone."

Cole Brandon pushed his horse through the water. Bigby and Abel had closed the trap neatly. They couldn't fight from the water and they couldn't charge up the bank against those guns.

Lee Abel grinned at him as he rode out of the water. Blane Cordell sat astride his horse a few feet away.

"What do you want, Bigby?" Cole snapped.

"We're takin' them rifles," the mountain man said tersely. "We need 'em to fight the Mexicans."

"You steal these guns," Cole said, "and you'll never come back to the States, Bigby."

"Ain't figurin' on comin' back to the States," Bigby grinned. "We're stayin' in Texas after we lick Santa Anna."

The twenty-five hard cases were half-hidden in the brush along the bank. Behind them Cole saw the honest traders

leaving their wagons and coming forward, staring curiously. They knew that something was wrong but they didn't know what.

"You'll never get those guns through to Texas," Cole said. "The Comanches will scalp every one of you."

"Reckon we'll take our chances," Bigby retorted. "Git those wagons up on the banks, one driver to each wagon. The rest o' you hombres wait out in the river."

Cole Brandon watched the traders coming up. They were not fighting men and they weren't ready to risk their lives for him. He had some friends among them; others had heard about the rifles and thought he was taking them to Santa Fe for the Mexican Government. In the saloon in Independence, Ted Bigby had seemed to hit the nail on the head when he claimed Cole Brandon intended to clean up on the war.

"Maybe you'd like to shoot it out," Lee Abel called. The gambler lifted his rifle. "I'm owin' you a slug in the belly anyhow, Brandon."

"Put it down," Bigby roared. "There ain't nobody bein' killed unless I say so."

"Tell 'em to move fast," Abel grumbled.

"Git the wagons up," Bigby said to the trader. "One man in each wagon an' make him throw out his gun afore he comes in."

Cole Brandon looked across at the opposite bank.

"Reckon it won't work, Brandon," Bigby said gruffly. "We're goin' in after you if you try to go back. There's near sixty guns against your twenty, an' you're in the water."

"THE trader looked at Bigby and Abel. "What about my men?" he asked.

"They git a horse and supplies enough to take 'em back to Independence," Bigby said, "unless they figger on ridin' with us to Texas."

Cole Brandon turned his horse back into the river.

"What do they want?" Stewart asked when Cole came back to the stranded wagons.

"They're taking the rifles," Cole said. "We get a free trip back to Independence."

"Like hell," Stewart swore.

Cole saw Juanita Gomez sitting up on wagon number two beside Tolivar Simms. Already the mules were beginning to bray as the cold water swished past them, up to the hocks.

"We can't stay here," the wagoner growled. "The wheels are already sinkin'. We'll be in tight in less than an hour."

Cole looked at the solid bottoms of the Conestogas. They were made waterproof for river crossings. Oftentimes, when the water was too deep to roll through, they had taken off the wheels and floated the wagons like rafts.

"The wheels won't sink any further than the bottom of the wagons," Cole said quietly. He glanced up at the sun. It wouldn't be dark for another two hours, and they couldn't do anything till night. "Take eight men," he told Mat Stewart. "Post them around the rear wagon. I'll take the rest up front with me."

Mat Stewart gasped. "We're stayin' here?" he asked.

Cole Brandon nodded. It would be hard on the mules and horses but they'd have to stand it.

"How long?" the wagoner asked in amazement.

"Till tonight," Cole explained. "We're pulling off the wheels and floating the wagons downstream in the darkness. If it's a dark night they might not see us, and if they do see us, we're going anyway."

"What about the mules?" Stewart demanded. "You ain't floatin' them down, Cole, an' we're needin' 'em wherever we land the wagons."

"We can stampede the animals into Bigby's camp," Cole Brandon said tersely. "There are a hundred mules, and they'll be running in front of us. It's a chance and we're taking it."

Mat Stewart's eyes were gleaming in anticipation as he rode away. Cole Brandon looked up at Tolivar Simms. The giant had heard the conversation.

"Where do we go with the wagons?" Simms asked.

"There's a sand bar about eight miles below Chouteau's Island," Cole explained. "It's half covered with cottonwoods. Fix a tow rope to each wagon and wade out when you reach the bar. You can fasten the ropes to the trees and wait for us to come up with the mules."

Simms nodded in agreement. He leaped down from the wagon and walked back to

transfer the information to the other drivers. Cole Brandon splashed up to the lead wagon.

"You comin' in?" Bigby yelled from the shore. The bank was about seventy-five yards away.

In answer Cole directed the lead wagoner to turn his mules back across the river.

"Form a corral," Cole called softly. "Keep the mules on the inside."

Ted Bigby rode his horse a few yards out into the water and stared. The lead wagon was going back across the river, forming a circle as the next two followed in order. Whips cracked and drivers swore as they yanked the animals in toward the center. The loose stock was pushed inside the enclosure and it was complete.

Cole Brandon laughed. If Bigby had thought about it, he could have killed a few of the mules and stopped the operation, but the mountain man was too dumfounded to think. The ten Brandon Conestogas were formed in a rough circle out in the center of the river!

ALREADY, drivers were splashing about in the water, unharnessing the mules and piling the gear inside the wagons.

"Let 'em be," Bigby shouted. "They ain't comin' out." A few shots had been fired but none had taken effect.

"Everybody inside the enclosure," Cole shouted. Thus far the plan had worked out exceedingly well. He had depended on the slow-witted Bigby not to act and the wagon boss had run true to form.

Mat Stewart came back with a huge grin on his face. "Bigby must be thinkin' we're out o' our minds, Cole."

Cole Brandon nodded. "We'll keep a watch posted on both sides of the enclosure in case Bigby should decide to rush us."

"He won't," Stewart said. "He's figgerin' on us walkin' out with our hands up an' blue in the face tomorrow mornin'."

"Cold rations tonight," the trader ordered. "We'll slip off the wheels as soon as it gets dark."

Ted Bigby was talking with Lee Abel on the shore. They could hear the gambler's voice raised in anger. Evidently, Abel was urging an immediate attack on the enclosure. Bigby was against it.

"I reckon Abel's a mite smarter than Bibgy," Stewart chuckled. "He knows we got an idea in mind."

In another hour fires sprang up on both sides of the river as the besiegers cooked the evening meal. A half mile beyond the river bank, the remaining wagons had formed a wide circle. Several times Cole had seen some of his friends talking to Bigby, trying to persuade him to give up the idea.

"He ain't givin' in," Mat Stewart observed. "He's needin' them guns an' he knows the traders ain't gonna get into this fight when it starts."

Cole Brandon looked up at the evening sky. There were clouds, red-tinted from the departing sun. If only the moon would remain behind that bank of cloud till they got the wagons afloat!

As it grew darker, the fires seemed to grow larger. Bigby had built a dozen huge bonfires along the water's edge to forestall any dash for freedom. The lumbering wagons would not get very far running through the firelight.

"I reckon we'll be losin' some good mules," Mat Stewart said, "but we kin afford 'em, Cole. Bigby's gonna be surprised when these longears come a-runnin' out o' the water."

The wagons had already settled so that the bottoms were touching water. In the dusk some of the drivers were already working on the wheels.

"We'll have one man with each wagon," Cole Brandon said, "and ten of us to ride behind the mules."

"We're runnin' the varmints down the bank to the sand bar," Mat Stewart added. "Here's hopin' none o' the wagons tip over."

"There's little breeze," Cole said. "They should be safe enough, and the men know how to handle them." He realized it was impossible to steer the big wagons and they would have to depend entirely upon the current. He'd scouted the river valley dozens of times and he remembered the sand bar very well. If all went well, the wagons would float within a dozen yards of the bar. An alert driver could scramble ashore with a tow rope and wind it around the trunk of one of the cottonwoods.

"Should be ready in another two hours," Mat Stewart ventured. "By that time

most o' Bigby's men will be asleep. He'll have a guard posted."

One by one the heavy wheels were yanked from the axles and placed inside the wagons. The ten drivers made fast their tow ropes and coiled them on the front seats.

Making the rounds for the last time, Cole Brandon saw Juanita Gomez peering out through the opening of Tolivar Simms' wagon.

"Everything all right?" the trader asked.

The Mexican girl nodded. "Where are we going, *Señor?*" she asked.

"Down stream," Cole grinned. "Don't fall off."

Once or twice the moon slipped out from behind the clouds, but from the shore it was impossible to see what was going on out in the center of the river.

When it grew dark again the first wagon was pushed out into the current and let drift. Soon another, and then another followed, like white ghosts, drifting with the current.

Cole Brandon sat astride the gray horse and watched them float away. The ten men left behind were grouped around the mule herd. Tolivar Simms leaned out of his wagon and waved a hand. Cole had given the giant command of the flotilla.

On the shore the fires twinkled, casting a red glow to a distance of a hundred feet offshore. The ten Conestogas could not be seen as they moved downstream.

"Ready?" Mat Stewart whispered. The wagoner held a pistol overhead.

Cole waited till the last wagon had drifted out of sight. Then lifting the Walker Colt he squeezed the trigger. The ten men lifted their voices and shot up into the air. A hundred mules brayed and plunged in the shallow water.

"Get 'em goin'." Stewart roared. They turned the herd toward the bank.

"Keep down low!" Cole Brandon yelled above the uproar. "They'll open up when we get near."

Already the guards were firing out into the darkness, thinking the wagons were making a break for the shore, Cole heard Bigby's stentorian voice ordering the men to their places.

The hundred mules scrambled up through six inches of water. They came out of the blackness like a black wedge with the ten men shouting like fiends behind them.

VI

STRAIGHT through the fires the first group of animals charged, scattering the embers, braying with fear. Cole Brandon rode behind the outside flank. He saw Bigby go down in the rush. The mountain man tried to jump onto the back of one of the mules, but he lost his grip. The wagon boss screamed once before the sharp hoofs cut him to pieces.

Several of the mules were already down and screaming with pain from bullet wounds. The others continued through the encampment. Cole caught a glimpse of Lee Abel. The gambler was behind a tree firing with a rifle. He'd lost his hat and he was coatless.

The trader turned the gray toward the gambler. Abel saw him coming. He yelled and raised the rifle to his shoulder. Bending low, Cole charged straight for the man.

Abel's bullet knocked the hat from his head. Then several mules got in between himself and the gambler. They were swept away in the wild rush. Cole flashed a quick shot at Abel with the Walker and missed. He tried to pull his horse out of the melee and give chase to the gambler, who was now fleeing toward a thicket where the cutthroats kept their horses.

Mat Stewart was pointing and yelling above the uproar. Blane Cordell had jonied Abel.

"We got to git them," Stewart shouted.

Cole Brandon nodded in agreement. If Abel and Cordell got away, the fight would have to begin all over again. The two would organize Bigby's crew and give chase.

Lashing out with the barrel of the Walker, Cole managed to drive a hole between the closely massed mules. He shot out into the open and Mat Stewart joined him. They turned their mounts toward the thicket. Others of Bigby's gang had gone down beneath the sharp hoofs of the mules. Their blood-curdling screams could be heard across the river.

"In here," Stewart called.

The two horsemen plunged through the brush. They caught a glimpse of Abel and

Cordell climbing onto their mounts. The fat gun man spun his horse and Cole saw the gleam of the gun. Cordell's pistol cracked and the bullet zipped past his cheek.

"Get 'em!" Stewart grated, driving his horse forward.

Cole Brandon steadied his mount coolly and took aim. His first shot struck Cordell in the forehead. The fat man threw up his hands; his head jerked back and he fell from the back of the horse.

Mat Stewart, riding straight toward the fleeing Lee Abel, pitched forward out of his saddle when his horse stepped in a hole and went down. The wagoner let go a shot as he dived forward. His bullet struck Abel's horse in the flank. The animal screamed as the bullet tore through its body. As it fell forward on its forelegs, Abel went over its head landing in the brush.

The gambler came to his feet like a cat. He whirled in the semi-darkness. The moon had come out now and Cole Brandon saw the man's teeth gleam as he drew back his lips in a half-snarl.

Abel's gun barked but the shot went wild. Cole Brandon lifted the Walker and squeezed the trigger. It fell on an empty cylinder. He heard Mat Stewart's gun from the ground and Abel seemed to wince. A moment later the gray hit him with terrific impact. Cole Brandon rode through.

He pulled the gray horse up fifteen yards past the huddled shape on the ground. Mat Stewart ran up with his gun. He bent over the fallen gambler.

"He's a dead 'un," Stewart mumbled. "I think I hit him, too."

Cole Brandon stared. Abel, Cordell and Bigby had played for high stakes. They had lost.

"Reckon we'd better git back and line them mules up," Stewart grunted. They caught up with the mules a few minutes later. The drovers had managed to keep the animals running along the bank of the river.

Cole glanced over the stretch of water now gleaming brightly in the rays of the moon. He heard the splashing in the distance. By the time the two dozen guards on the other shore got across, the mule herd would be far away.

Mat Stewart called to Jeff Tolan.

"Lose any one, Jeff?" he asked.

"Nary a one," the wagoner grinned. "Reckon they wuz shootin' at the mules most o' the time. Them devils did all the damage."

Stewart nodded. "We ain't lost more than a half dozen o' the critters," he chuckled. "It was a good night, Cole."

"They won't follow us," Cole Brandon said. "The leaders are dead. The rest of them will probably drift down to Santa Fe. They're not strong enough to buck us now."

"Hope them wagons got down to the sand bar all right," Stewart ventured. "We'd be in a heap o' trouble if the mules got through and they had no wagons to pull."

The ten riders kept the mules in close to the river bank as they plunged through the darkness.

"Reckon they'll run themselves out in another hour," Mat Stewart called once. "We'll be able to walk 'em onto the sand bar."

Cole Brandon glanced down along the river. The moon swung through the clouds, revealing a wide expanse of silvery water. They were about two miles from the sand bar. Mat Stewart pointed excitedly.

"There's one of 'em," the wagoner yelled.

Cole saw the white speck against the dark background. Minutes later they saw other specks dotting the bar. The mules had relapsed into a swinging trot and the rider had them well in hand.

Moving out onto the bar, they counted nine wagons already drawn up on the sand and one being pulled in by three of the drivers. Tolivar Simms loomed up in front of them.

"All here and accounted for," the giant grinned. "Have any trouble?"

Cole explained briefly. They helped pull in the remaining wagon and then made preparations to camp on the bar for the night. The sand was dry and the bar provided a natural fortress. Three men were stationed to guard the peninsula. The others built huge fires and warmed themselves. Some of the drivers were soaked to the skin from working in the water.

"So far so good," Mat Stewart smiled as he bit into a juicy rump steak. "We kin get the wagons in order tomorrer mornin'

an' head south. It ain't the place where you wanted to turn off, Cole, but it'll have to do."

"You know the country well enough?" the trader asked, "to take us through from here?" He recognized the dangers still ahead of them. By this time Jose Alvarez was probably streaking for Santa Fe. It would be a question of time before he again ran into the Mexican dandy.

And that was not all.

"It's five hundred miles to Pecos River," Mat Stewart said, "an' we're a small party, Cole. Reckon there's plenty o' Comanches and Kiowas in between."

Cole Brandon nodded grimly. He had thought of the Indian danger when planning the trip. Traveling with ninety other wagons made them safe from an Indian attack. They had intended to go with the train all the way to the headwaters of the Pecos and then follow the river till they reached their destination. Bigby's sudden attack had upset things.

The wagoner scratched his jaw. "Maybe now that Bigby and Abel are dead," he observed, "we could meet up with the others an' roll with 'em again."

"No," Cole said. "We'll take our chances alone." Going back with the wagon train meant more trouble. Bigby's friends would probably still be with the caravan and they would manage to interfere some way. There would be ill feeling. If they struck out alone to the south Alvarez might have a little difficulty finding them.

"It'll be a long march," Stewart said quietly, "an' a dry one most o' the way, Brandon."

"We'll risk it," Cole said.

They were moving at dawn with the wagons back on wheels and six mules hitched to each vehicle. Juanita Gomez was more than a little concerned.

"We are not going to Santa Fe, *Señor?*" she asked confusedly.

Cole shook his head. The girl was again a problem. He had intended to transfer her to another wagon immediately before they reached Santa Fe, and then make a quick drive down the Pecos before Alvarez was aware of their destination. The Mexican was a danger. They were out of the States and he could act whenever he chose.

"I'll get you to Santa Fe," he promised.

"But where are we going?" Juanita queried.

"To the Pecos River," Cole said. She had a dozen other questions ready to fire at him but he didn't wait to hear them. The Pecos was a long distance off and they had no time to lose.

ALL the water kegs were filled as they cut south into desert country. Mat Stewart had been through the route before on a direct journey to Chihuahua from the States. They'd hit the Red River in a hundred miles; another dry march would bring them to the Salt Fork, then the headwaters of the Colorado, and another hundred miles to the Pecos.

"They're all dry marches," Mat Stewart explained. "We might run across a few water holes here an' there, but we ain't bankin' on them."

Daily, they moved toward the south with the desert growing hotter all the time and the wheels sinking deeper into the sand. The water kegs were dry and the mules had been without water for twenty-four hours when they reached the Red River.

"A horse would o' give out," Mat Stewart grinned. "These damned mules kin go forever."

Each night a heavy guard was set around the mule herd. Once they had seen a band of Indians in the distance. The savages had stopped to watch the ten white-covered wagons rolling across the arid stretch of sand. There had been a dozen of the watchers on the distant hill. They had ridden off in silence.

"Might be a huntin' party," the wagoner said, "or they might be scoutin' us."

Two nights later Cole Brandon sprang from beneath the wagon. One of the guards had fired the alarm shot. Men were sprinting out into the darkness toward the mule herd. When they arrived, the Indians were gone and Ben Jipson, one of the herders, had a knife wound in the arm.

"Must o' been Comanches," Jipson grunted. "I spotted eight of 'em. Another varmint came up on the back o' me with his sticker. They took some o' the mules, Brandon."

Cole Brandon's face hardened. In the morning they made a count. Twenty-five mules had been run off. If the animals

started to give out now, they would have few replacements to fill the harnesses.

"It could o' been worse," Mat Stewart said. "If there had been a lot of 'em, they wouldn't be runnin' off just mules. They'd be comin' fer scalps!"

They moved up along the Salt Fork till they came to a shallow place. One of the wagons overturned in a pot-hole and the oak cases had to be dragged out of the water and the rifles cleaned and dried. It took more time.

Cole Brandon watched the men driving through the heat day after day. The tension was tightening. He'd called a meeting the first night after they left the Arkansas and explained the purpose of the mission. There had been no disagreement. His drivers would go with him—clean down to Mexico City if he asked it!

Again the water kegs were empty when they sighted the Colorado River in Texas terrtiory. The Pecos was another ninety-five miles. They had been moving for weeks without sighting anything but a few roving bands of buffalo, elk and coyotes.

"You think they'll be waitin' for us?" Mat Stewart asked once. "Maybe somethin' happened, Cole."

The trader's lips tightened. He'd lost weight on the dry marches. He was burning all the energy out of his body.

"If we don't find them on the Pecos," he snapped, "we'll take the guns clean down to San Antonio."

Stewart shrugged. "You heard where Urrea is?" he asked.

"No," Cole said. No one knew anything of the whereabouts of the Mexican general. Urrea was reported on the way north from Mexico City.

"Ninety-five miles an' we're there," Mat Stewart yelled the next morning. "Make 'em move, boys."

Each morning Cole Brandon rode at the head of the caravan anxiously searching the horizon toward the west and south. It did not seem possible that they could go through without any more opposition. Yet in a few days they would reach the Pecos and the small town of Elk Head.

With each passing day the spirits of Mat Stewart soared higher and higher.

"We'll be rollin' into Elk Head without losin' a man or a gun," he chuckled.

Cole Brandon doubled the guard at night. He walked alone in the evening and stared toward the western horizon. Once the Mexican girl came out with him.

"You are one fine man, *Señor* Brandon," she said earnestly.

Cole looked at her. She had not complained on the journey. When he gave her a larger share of the water than the others, she had taken it back and poured it into the water barrel. Yet all the while she had been working against him.

"You are Jose Alvarez's wife," the trader said quietly. He heard the girl catch her breath.

"You know?" she asked.

"I know Alvarez sent you," Cole Brandon murmured. "You were to find out where the guns were going."

AGAIN she was quiet. "Jose is not my husband," Juanita Gomez said finally.

The trader stared. "Who but a wife would do what you are doing?" he asked. "You are not his sister?"

"Jose is my half-brother," the Mexican girl told him. "We were raised together from childhood. My father was a wealthy merchant in Vera Cruz."

"Did Jose suggest that you hide in my wagon?" Cole Brandon asked her. "Or was it your own idea?"

Juanita smiled. "Jose would not let me go at first, *Señor*. I had to persuade him that it would be safe. You know how important it is for him that he succeed."

Cole Brandon nodded. "And you know how important it is for me," he said tersely.

"You are taking the guns to the Texans?" the Mexican girl asked.

"Captain Stoner of the Texas militia is meeting us in Elk Head," Cole explained. "I'm delivering the rifles to him on order. It is the only way we can arm the Texans in this fight."

The Mexican girl studied him for a long while in silence. "In Vera Cruz," she said quietly, "we do not want this war. Even Jose is against it, but his hands are tied. It is coming."

"Yes," Cole Brandon said savagely, "it is coming." He paused. "The Texans cannot bear the yoke Santa Anna puts on their necks—not after Vasquez!"

"Vasquez?" Juanita asked. "You were

not there, *Señor?*" Her face had whitened in the moonlight at the mention of the Vasquez incident. All Mexico, and all Texas territory knew about it.

"I wasn't there," Cole Brandon said. "I've been a trader on the Santa Fe trail for the past eight years."

"Yet Vasquez means so much to you," Juanita Gomez ventured, "that you have risked your business, your money and your life to send munitions to the Texans—to avenge Vasquez."

Cole Brandon listened to a coyote howling across the open plains. "I have no father and no mother," he said simply. "I had a brother—a boy of seventeen, attending the university in Vasquez. They stood him up against the wall with the others. He was a boy of spirit."

The pain came back into his heart again. It was a knife that cut and twisted. They had had great plans. Young Joe was studying in the Spanish school so he could learn more about the Mexican people. The Brandons were to open the trade with Mexico proper. There would be wagons rolling into Chihuahua, down to San Antonio, across the Rio Grande. There would be a hundred wagons—a thousand mules, hundreds of men. Santa Anna had destroyed all of that.

"I am sorry," Juanita said. Her fingers touched his arm. "What shall you do when you deliver the guns?" she asked.

"I am enlisting with Captain Stoner's company," Cole explained. "We are stopping Urrea first and then Santa Anna himself when he comes north." He realized how much depended upon the six hundred rifles. Stoner's militia was poorly armed. They could not expect to stand up against Urrea's well-trained cavalry, and Urrea had to be stopped. If the Mexican cavalry were permitted to overrun the country before the Texans could unite, there would be no revolt. The thousands of American settlers in the north Mexican colony would have to submit to the whims of *El Presidente,* the fiend who had climbed to power in Mexico City over the bleeding bodies of those he had executed.

"I shall go to Santa Fe," Juanita Gomez said, "till the war is over."

They walked back to the wagons and Cole Brandon helped the girl up onto the seat.

"Do not think too harshly of my people," Juanita said softly, "because of one man. We do not love him either."

Cole Brandon nodded quietly. He didn't hate the Mexicans as a people. Some day under the leadership of a finer man, they would emerge as an honest nation, but there was a debt he had to wipe out. He had to fight against the despotism which Santa Anna represented; it was an evil thing which had to be destroyed.

"I shall be in Santa Fe with my uncle," the girl repeated as he turned away. "We shall be there when this war is over."

Cole looked at her. "We'll meet again," he said simply.

AT DAWN, before they could harness the animals to the wagons, Mat Stewart pointed to the south. Cole Brandon watched the column of horsemen wheeling up over a ridge a mile distant. The early morning sun gleamed red on their polished lances.

"They don't ride like Injuns," Stewart said softly. There were at least a hundred and fifty in the column.

"They're Mexicans," Cole Brandon murmured. "Break open a few of the cases and give each man three rifles. Get them in position, Stewart. We're fighting."

The wagoner nodded. Both men realized the terrific odds. The only body of cavalry as far north as this was General Urrea's horsemen. They were trained soldiers—a hundred and fifty to twenty.

The troop halted on the ridge and then a man rode forward with a white flag. The drivers were working frantically under Mat Stewart's direction, piling boxes and cases in between the wagons. A case of rifles had been broken open and the new guns were being distributed. Smaller cases of munitions were hauled from the wagons.

Cole Brandon watched the man on horseback. He recognized the lean brown face and the small wisp of a mustache. Jose Alvarez looked different in the trim tight-fitting jacket of a Mexican cavalry officer.

The trader leaned against one of the wagons, hands in pockets. He watched the men at work and then he glanced again toward the Mexican troopers on the hill. It wasn't fair asking the drivers to fight against such odds. They didn't have the same motive for fighting as he. They were

American citizens riding into a foreign country to help men of their own blood. There was no obligation to do so. Santa Anna had not touched them.

Alvarez climbed stiffly from the horse and walked forward. His face was gray and drawn from fatigue. Cole Brandon realized the strain under which the Mexican had been moving these past weeks. Alvarez had had to ride to Santa Fe alone over hundreds of miles of Indian country. He had to find Urrea's cavalry and bring a troop up into northern Texas and locate the ten wagons before they reached their destination.

"*Gracias, Señor* Brandon," Alvarez said, "We meet again."

"Under different circumstances, Captain," Cole smiled. He liked the little Mexican. It was a pity that Santa Anna had such capable men in his army.

Alvarez straightened. "I wish to inform you, *Señor* Brandon," he said, "of the wishes of my superior officer, Major Hobrillo of the Mexican Army."

Cole nodded indifferently. He knew what was coming.

"You are now on Mexican territory," Alvarez resumed. "War has officially been declared by *El Presidente* Santa Anna. Texas militia has fired on General Urrea's force. It is necessary to put down the revolt."

Tolivar Simms came up and spat in the grass. He grinned at the Mexican officer. Mat Stewart was looking to the priming of his side arm. The other drivers had grouped around in a circle, Jeff Tolan, Taw Blankey, Bill Morse—men who had worked for Cole Brandon since the beginning. They waited for him to speak and they were unafraid.

"Major Hobrillo," Alvarez went on, "requests that you turn the wagons over to us. Your men will receive free transport back to Santa Fe, under escort. From there they will be permitted to return to the States."

Cole Brandon smiled coldly. "You've been after these guns a long time, Alvarez," he stated.

Captain Alvarez nodded regretfully. "It has not been my wish," he said. "My government heard of the shipment coming through Independence. I was sent to watch them. We did not know what you intended doing with the rifles. I was given the authority to buy them for our own army, or confiscate them if you attempted to make delivery to the Texans."

"You know where they are going now?" Cole asked.

Alvarez smiled slightly. "We have discovered," he said simply. "May I congratulate you, *Señor* Brandon, on your cleverness." There was honest admiration in the younger man's brown eyes. He waited for a reply. Cole Brandon looked at Mat Stewart.

"I might add," Alvarez continued, "that if you refuse to give up the rifles, we are prepared to take them by force. Major Hobrillo does not want bloodshed if he can help it."

"Major Hobrillo," Cole said dryly, "is not like his Commander-in-Chief." He saw the red come into Jose Alvarez's face. Many Mexicans were ashamed of the cruelty of *El Presidente.*

"It would be foolish to resist," Captain Alvarez said. "We are too strong for you, *Señor* Brandon."

"Like hell," Tolivar Simms spluttered.

Cole Brandon turned to the assembled men. He spoke calmly. "You have Captain Alvarez's ultimatum," he said. "The Texans are now officially at war with the Mexican Government. Captain Stoner of the Texas militia is waiting for these rifles. If he gets them, he can probably withstand General Urrea and give Texas time to prepare itself for the invasion."

"If he don't get them," Mat Stewart muttered, "Texas falls even before it stands up."

"I can't offer you very much hope," Cole Brandon went on. "There is a possibility that Captain Stoner has sent a force of men to search for us. If we can hold off Major Hobrillo's troop, we might be found. We are well supplied with guns and ammunition even though the Mexican troop outnumbers us one hundred and fifty to twenty."

"It ain't much," Jeff Tolan said dryly.

"On the other hand," Cole said, "you do not owe the Texans anything. I can't ask you to shed your blood for a cause in which you have no stakes; you gain nothing and you stand an excellent chance of losing your lives. Major Hobrillo has guaranteed your safe delivery back into the

States." He paused. "You can make your choice."

Tolivar Simms cleared his throat. "What do you figger on doin', boss?" he asked.

"If we lose the guns," Cole Brandon said slowly, "I'll get into Texas some way."

The giant took three steps and stood beside his chief. "I'm votin' to take these damned guns through," he boomed. "Santa Anna ain't pushing around no white men."

Mat Stewart stood beside the giant.

"One hundred and fifty to twenty," Cole Brandon said quietly. "Some of you men have families."

Jeff Tolan moved across the imaginary line. They followed one after the other. The last ten made a race out of it to avoid being last. Jose Alvarez watched in amazement. When the twenty men were behind Cole Brandon, the Mexican bowed politely.

"It is going to be a hard war, *Señor* Brandon," he smiled. He stepped forward and held out his hand. Cole shook it firmly. "I regret," Alvarez said, "that we are not on the same side, *Señor*."

COLE BRANDON walked to the wagon in which Juanita Gomez sat. He helped her down. She was white and the fear was in her eyes.

"You will take your sister back with you, Captain," Cole said. "This is no place for a woman."

Alvarez nodded. He put an arm around the girl. Together they walked toward the Mexican's horse. Cole Brandon watched them trot slowly back to the troop on the hill.

"She was a fine girl," Mat Stewart ventured.

"Line up the men," Cole Brandon said. There were things he had to put out of his mind.

Captain Alvarez consulted with his commanding officer. The Mexican squadrons wheeled into formation across the summit of the slope. They intended to come down in a charge which would sweep directly through the ten wagons.

Cole stared toward the south. If Captain Stoner had actually left Elk Head, they might hear the sounds of firing. If not, it was only a matter of time.

"Here they come," Mat Stewart said tersely. The wave had started down the slope, lances waving, small brown-faced horseman, grim and determined.

"Don't fire," Cole shouted, "till I give the word."

The twenty men waited. Each man had three rifles at his side, loaded.

The Mexican troopers, all expert horsemen, rode with the reckless abandon of Comanches. They drove down the slope at terrific speed. In a moment they were less than a hundred yards away.

"Hold your fire," Cole Brandon called. He knew each man under his command could shoot off the three rifles in less time than it took a horseman to gallop a hundred yards.

Sixty yards from the enclosure, Cole yelled. "Fire!"

The brave Alvarez was up in the front of the troop, leading the charge. The first volley from the white men knocked the young Mexican's horse from beneath him.

Cole saw the captain sailing forward in a dive. He landed on the ground on all fours and staggered forward. Rifles cracked from beneath each wagon and Mexican troopers slipped from the saddles. But the charge came on.

Cole Brandon scooped up a rifle and fired it point-blank at a charging trooper. The man threw up his hands and fell backward. Still the fire continued from the twenty wagoners. A group of Mexicans rode straight up to the wagon and tried to leap through.

Tolivar Simms drove over the barricade, ripped a long lance from the hands of one of the troopers and dragged him from the saddle. The others were shot from the seats by the accurate fire of the Americans.

"Get back," Cole roared at the giant.

Simms, empty pistol in hand, was running toward another horseman nearby. He went down on his knees when a bullet hit him in the body. Two other Americans had fallen in the fire from the Mexican troopers. The others continued to fire coolly, steadily.

It was too much for the morale of the brown troopers. They wavered and then broke. Dozens of them were squirming on the ground. Riderless horses broke away from the deadly enclosure, screaming with fear and pain.

"They're runnin'," Mat Stewart howled. "Give it to 'em!"

"Reload your guns," Cole Brandon snapped. "They'll come again."

A bugle had sounded and the Mexicans were retiring to the hill. Cole Brandon saw Jose Alvarez riding double with one of the troopers. The Captain was unharmed.

Two of the Americans had run out to bring back Tolivar Simms. The giant was grinning, but his face was white.

"Set me up under the wagon," Simms grunted, "an' somebody load a few guns fer me."

Cole Brandon saw the blood staining the giant's shirt.

"I got plenty o' fight left in me," Simms grinned. "Don't nobody worry."

Cole nodded. He watched the Mexican troop assembled on the hill. They'd lost a lot of men but they had plenty left and the guns had to be taken at any cost.

"Here they come," Mat Stewart mumbled. "Looks like somethin' new, Cole."

The brown troopers were driving down the hill in massed formation, columns of four, aiming for an opening between two of the wagons. Evidently they intended to drive a wedge into the enclosure and swarm through for a hand-to-hand fight.

"Kill the lead horses," Cole shouted suddenly.

Tolivar Simms chuckled nearby and lifted his rifle. The men caught the idea immediately. As the column drew near, rifles cracked from beneath the stalled wagons. The four lead horses, two chestnuts, a bay and an iron gray, went down, spilling their riders.

The riders behind tried to swerve out of the way but they had been packed too closely. Other horses stumbled over the dying animals in front of them. The four lead animals were riddled with bullets.

"Now let them have it," Cole roared.

The riflemen from the wagons poured in a continuous fire as the horseless Mexicans came forward on foot. There was a terrific pile-up behind the first riders. The wedge was completely broken up with troopers scurrying in all directions and the officers trying to coordinate the drive.

In a few moments it was all over and the Mexicans on the retreat again, leaving behind them at least twenty dead and wounded.

"Reckon we have 'em now," Mat Stewart grunted. "They ain't liable to charge straight at us agin', Brandon."

Jeff Tolan suddenly let out a roar from across the enclosure. The Missourian was pointing toward the east. They saw the cloud of dust on the horizon, rapidly moving nearer.

Mat Stewart yelled and waved his hat. "They're comin'!" he boomed. "The Texans!"

Cole Brandon ran to the wagon for his glasses. He peered at the oncoming riders. Indians didn't come that way, and they wouldn't be riding into an open fight between Mexicans and Americans. The Mexican troop was watching from the hill also.

Cole saw the sun shine on a lance; then another one. His face tightened and he set the glass down.

"Captain Stoner?" Stewart asked.

"Mexicans," Cole Brandon said simply. "Probably another troop Hobrillo had out looking for us."

The men in the enclosure were silent. They'd beaten off one hundred and fifty trained Mexican cavalrymen. Major Hobrillo's men had been humbled; now they were receiving reinforcements.

COLE BRANDON watched as the new body of horsemen reported to the commander on the hill. There were about seventy-five more men in the division, more than making up for the troopers the Mexican major had lost.

"The more of 'em there are," Simms growled from the ground, "the more we'll have to shoot."

Cole turned to Jeff Tolan. "You know how fast my gray is?" he asked quietly.

The wagoner nodded. "Ain't an animal on the trail kin move like him," he acknowledged.

"Somebody has to get through to look for Captain Stoner," the trader said slowly. "He may be in the vicinity. It's a chance. The gray might get you through, Jeff. You want to take it?"

Tolan spat in the dirt. "I'm takin' it," he said, "if you boys will shoot down a couple o' greasers fer me. I hate missin' this."

The gray was quickly saddled. Jeff Tolan waved his hat, leaped over a wagon tongue and shot toward the west. Cole

Brandon had given him instructions to make a wide sweep and then head toward the Pecos. It was possible Captain Stoner would be somewhere north of the river.

The Mexicans spotted the lone rider immediately and a dozen men were despatched to give chase. Anxiously, the Americans watched as pursued and pursuers disappeared over a ridge.

"I'm thinkin' he'll git away," Mat Stewart muttered, "but there's no tellin' where Stoner is. If the Captain didn't start north fer us, it might take too long to bring him here."

Major Hobrillo wasted no time. Once more the Mexican troopers were divided into columns and driven down the hill. This time there were four groups of riders sweeping toward the wagons.

"Get the leaders," Cole Brandon ordered again.

Rifles cracked from the enclosure. Horses and horsemen went down, but the others came on. Many of them rode straight up to the wagons and tried to leap their animals through. They were shot down with pistols.

Young Alvarez had his horse shot from beneath him once again and a trooper helped him back out of range. The charge was broken. Cole Brandon took stock of the damage. Four of the Americans were down. Tolivar Simms had taken a bullet in the arm, rendering him useless.

Mat Stewart sat down on the ground. He looked at Cole Brandon. They had about fourteen men to withstand the next charge. Hobrillo would keep driving till he went through.

"Got any ideas?" Stewart asked laconically.

The trader shook his head. "All we can do is fight," he said quietly. "That's what I came here for."

It was past noon with the hot sun beating down on the little circle inside the wagons. The Mexican commander sent down details to pick up the wounded. There were at least twenty-five of them outside the corral. The Americans watched dispassionately.

Hobrillo made no immediate effort to attack. An hour passed in the broiling sun; another thirty minutes.

"He didn't figure on losin' so many men," Mat Stewart observed. "Maybe he's trying to figure out some way of gettin' us without comin' in."

A conference was going on between the Mexican officers. Cole Brandon could see them. Alvarez was in the midst.

After awhile the captain rode down the hill with a white flag.

Mat Stewart grinned. "Maybe they're gonna surrender, Cole," he chuckled.

Cole Brandon walked out fifteen yards to meet the Mexican. He didn't want Alvarez to see how weak they were.

"Major Hobrillo appreciates the bravery of the *Americanos*," Alvarez said. "He wishes to urge that you reconsider his proposition. You can see that we have received reinforcements and it is only a matter of time before we will break through."

Cole saw the worry in the younger man's brown eyes. There was something else coming.

"If we don't accept his terms?" Cole asked.

"Then, *Señor* Brandon," Jose Alvarez resumed reluctantly, "Major Hobrillo has no alternative but to order his men to take no prisoners."

Cole Brandon smiled coldly. He knew none of the wagoners would be taken prisoner. They'd go down fighting to the last man.

"As a friend, *Señor* Brandon," Alvarez pleaded. "You will accept the Major's terms."

Cole blinked. "We'll need time to consider it," he said. "I'll have to talk to the men."

Alvarez nodded. "I shall wait," he said.

Cole walked back toward the wagons. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the open plain to the east. Jeff Tolan had been gone a long time. Either he had been overtaken by the Mexicans and killed, or he'd found Captain Stoner of the Texans.

"What does he want?" Mat Stewart asked.

Cole explained. "We'll let him wait for his answer," he added. "Every minute counts now."

The wagoners came around to listen. Alvarez sat astride his horse about twenty yards away.

"Anybody know any good stories?" Mat Stewart grinned. "We're keepin' the *señor* waitin'."

The men grinned back at him.

"Somebody start an argument," Stewart said. "It'll look like a real American meetin'."

Cole Brandon sat down on a box. He looked at Alvarez and shrugged his shoulders as if to say the matter was out of his hands. A vote was going on and the Americans were in their glory. It would take a little time to arrive at a decision. There would be a broken head or two.

Alvarez nodded. The Mexican had been in the States.

The voices of the Americans rose in dispute but the Mexican captain was too far away to hear distinctly.

"I'm votin' to ride back to the States," one of the wagoners growled. He was a short man with whiskers and a red flannel shirt.

"Like hell," another retorted. In a moment they were rolling on the ground in terrific combat.

Cole Brandon saw the gleam in the eyes of the bewhiskered man. The fight would last a long time and no one would be hurt. The Americans gathered around the fighters yelling loudly. Alvarez stared.

It went on for nearly fifteen minutes and then another man joined in.

"Give it to 'em," Mat Stewart roared.

They heard the shout from the hill and Alvarez turned helplessly and rode back to his superiors.

"They're gittin' tired o' waitin'," Stewart grinned at Cole Brandon. "We ain't even taken a vote yet!"

Alvarez galloped back after a few minutes. "We must have your answer immediately," the Mexican said.

Cole Brandon stood up. He looked at the men behind him.

"Tell 'em to come shootin'," one of the wagoners growled.

Alvarez turned to the trader.

Cole nodded. "That's the answer," he said slowly.

Alvarez shook his head and turned his mount.

Soon, far away on the rise, a bugle shrilled.

The Mexican troopers lined up once more. Cole watched them. The fourteen drivers crouched on the ground waiting. It was futile.

Hobrillo had his men fanning out in a wide circle. Somewhere, they were sure to break through the defense.

Then Tolivar Simms let out a hoarse yell from the ground. His huge hand was pointing toward the east. During the excitement they had not seen the cloud of dust drawing nearer to them.

The wagoners watched that cloud.

"Could be buffalo," Stewart whispered, "an' it could be Injuns or more greasers."

Cole Brandon lifted his glass. Major Hobrillo's force had seen that moving cloud also. They'd halted.

"Recognize 'em?" Stewart asked.

The trader saw the horse moving up in the front of the group. The animal was a gray. A bugle sounded from the Mexican troop. Immediately, the cavalrymen wheeled into formation.

"They're running'!" Mat Stewart howled. "The Texans are comin'!"

Cole Brandon saw Jose Alvarez ride past the brow of the hill. The Mexican column rode away toward the west. Alvarez waved a hand back to him. Cole Brandon walked out into the open. He lifted a hand in salute to the gallant Mexican officer. Juanita Gomez rode beside the Mexican. Cole Brandon couldn't see the tears in her eyes.

"Santa Fe," he whispered.

Minutes later, Captain Stoner, at the head of over two hundred hard-riding Texans, charged into the camp. The officer was a big man with a rocklike face and a tremendous nose.

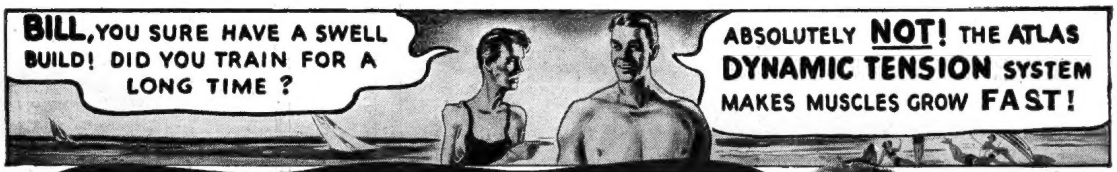
"The guns intact?" he asked.

Cole Brandon nodded quietly. "Six hundred of them," he said laconically. "A few have been used."

Captain Stoner smiled. "The Texans owe you a debt of gratitude, Mr. Brandon," he said. "General Urrea's force is almost upon us and I have three hundred more men at Elk Head without decent arms."

The trader stared at the retreating column of Mexicans. He felt a little better inside. Some of the bitterness had left his heart.

"Roll the wagons," he said to Mat Stewart. "We're riding into Texas." Again his eyes moved to the dust cloud on the horizon. "Santa Fe," he said softly.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BE A SUCCESS ...IN RADIO!

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME

Here's your opportunity to get started in a busy field with a bright peacetime future—where capable Technicians and Operators will cash in on their skill and training. So mail the Coupon for your FREE copy of my 64-page, illustrated book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It describes many fascinating types of Radio jobs, tells how N. R. I. trains you at home in spare time—how you get *practical* experience building and testing Radio Circuits with SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send!

Future Looks Bright For Well-Trained Radio Technicians, Operators

Keeping old Radios working is booming the Radio Repair business. Profits are large—and peacetime prospects are bright too. Think of the *new* boom in Radio Sales and Servicing that's coming—when new Radios are again available—when Frequency Modulation and Electronics can be promoted—when Television moves into its new era of expansion!

Broadcasting Stations, Aviation Radio, Police Radio, Loudspeaker Systems, Radio Manufacturing all employ qualified Radio men at good pay—and most of these fields have a *big backlog* of business that has built up during the war, *plus* opportunities to expand into *new* fields opened by wartime developments. You may never again see a time when it will be so easy to get a start in Radio!

Many Beginners Soon Make $5, $10 a Week EXTRA in Spare Time

The day you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that help show how to make EXTRA money fixing Radios in spare time while still learning. I send you SIX big kits of Radio parts as part of my Course. You LEARN Radio fundamentals from my illustrated, easy-to-grasp lessons—PRACTICE what you learn by building real Radio Circuits—and USE your knowledge to make EXTRA money!

Find Out What N. R. I. Can Do For You

MAIL THE COUPON for your FREE copy of my 64-page book. It's packed with Radio facts—things you never knew about opportunities in Broadcasting, Radio Servicing, Aviation Radio, other Radio Fields. Read the details about my Course—"50-50 Training Method"—6 Experimental Kits—*Extra Money Job Sheets*. See the fascinating jobs Radio offers and how *you* can train at home. Read many letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning. No obligation. Just MAIL COUPON in an envelope or pasted on a penny postal!—J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4NG, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

"Before I completed your lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC where I am now Chief Operator." HOLLIS F. HAYES, 327 Madison St., Lapeer, Michigan.

$200 a Month In Own Business

"For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased." ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

$10 a Week In Spare Time

"I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 a week—just spare time." JOHN JERRY, 300 So. H St., Exeter, Calif.

TELEVISION
ELECTRONICS
FREQUENCY MODULATION
My up-to-date Course includes training in these new developments.

YOU GET 6 KITS OF RADIO PARTS!

By the time you've built this Superheterodyne and many other Radio circuits with the six big kits of Radio parts I send you will have valuable *practical* experience!

Our 31st Year of Training Men for Success in Radio.

FREE
RADIO LESSON

I will send you a FREE Lesson, "Getting Acquainted with Receiver Servicing," to show you how practical it is to train for Radio in spare time. It's a valuable lesson. Study it — keep it — use it — without obligation! Tells how "Superhet" Circuits work, gives hints on Receiver Servicing, Locating Defects, Repair of Loudspeaker, I. F. Transformer, Gang Tuning Condenser, etc. 81 illustrations. Get your sample lesson FREE—mail Coupon NOW!

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